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Vol. I.

BUFFALO BEN, The Prince of the Pistol;

Or, Deadwood Dick in Disguise.

A SEQUEL TO "THE DOUBLE DAGGERS."

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "THE DOUBLE DAGGERS," ETC., ETC.



BUFFALO BEN.

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"BUFFALO DEMON," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE LONE CABIN.

PITCHED down in the heart of a bleak Montana wilderness, under the shadow of towering, pine-clad mountains, and facing a majestic, rolling prairie; here in this land of the lurking savage and fierce wild beasts, stood a solitary cabin, alone in its desolation.

It was strongly built, probably with a view to defense, and overgrown with wild vines, now deadened to russet brown by the wintry blasts that swept across the dun prairie. One door was the only visible mode of entrance: a narrow window up in under the eaves admitted light to the interior.

One wild, windy January day, years ago two persons sat before a roaring fire inside this isolated cabin, conversing. One was a man of about sixty years, for his hair was snowy-white, and his face seamed with many furrows, put there by the hand of time. But despite his years he evidently was inured to constant activity and hardship.

He was attired in the garb of a Nor'-western hunter; in truth, that was his calling, as was evidenced by the indiscriminate collection of paraphernalia strewn about the cabin—guns, pistols, traps, skins, and the many articles required by the hunter of the mountain and prairie.

The man's companion was a young woman of some three-and-twenty years. She was very pretty of face and form, and in her whole appearance bespoke education, modesty and refinement, which is but infrequently met with thus far beyond the bounds of civilization. She was light in complexion, with fair auburn hair, light brown eyes, and a mouth of tempting sweetness; and, too, her dress was unusually elegant and costly considering her rough surroundings; while diamonds and pearls graced her fair patrician fingers, her throat, and were tastefully arranged in her hair.

The interior of the cabin did not speak of a woman's hand in its arrangement, for things were strewn about in a chaos of disorder and neglect.

The furniture comprised a few rudely manufactured camp-stools, a table, and several piles of soft furs. And upon one of these piles the gaze of the young woman rested lovingly, while she conversed with the old hunter.

Over the huge open fire-place, in which burned brightly a pile of seasoned hickory logs, were hung the hunter's limited supply of cooking utensils; in one end of the cabin, which was large and roomy, were innumerable fire-logs, showing that no neglect of the hunter had left him unprepared for the cold winter.

"Phew!" the old man muttered, as he listened to the shrieking of the wind without, and the dismal sound of the blustering snow as it whirled in incessant eddies against the stanch cabin walls—"phew! this ar' a pesky bad day fer Janerwary. I've scooped down in this 'ere lattytude for nigh onter six year, and tan my peltries ef I ever see'd a colder,

more disagreeable snap. 'Tain't at all likely yer frien's 'll cum down across Twenty-Mile Stretch in sich weather like this, marm."

"Ah! sir, you do not know them. Neither fire nor storm will stop them, once they strike my trail," replied the young woman, shivering and glancing apprehensively around. "Friends, indeed! No bit-terer foes could a mortal have than they have been. With devilish perseverance they have followed me like a pack of bloodhounds; from place to place I have flown, endeavoring with my darling babes to escape death, but it seems as if the hand of God, as well as man, is turned against me!"

And the fair speaker burst into a fit of weeping, which lasted for several moments, during which the old hunter gazed grimly into the roaring fire.

"Ye mus'n't guv up the ghost like that, my gal," he said, at last, his tone betraying the sympathy he felt for her. "Hayr's one horny old paw that ain't turned ag'in' you, balance yer scales on that. Sum-how Old Zeke Ransom has been s'picious an' distrustful o' the weemen sex, since when, a young beaver, he got his heart smashed up in a love affair. But ye're an excepshun, my pretty—a downright dead-in-earnest excepshun, if ever thar was one.

"When I met ye down to Yocum, yesterday, wi' them two babies in yer arrums, an' ye 'peeled ter me fer purtection, says I to myself: 'Zeke Ransom, ef ye don' take in thet purty fawn, ye're jest the orneriest, ugliest old sallymander thet ever chawed leaden pills. Ther poor thing ar' needin' friends, an' w'at's ter hinder yer takin' her up ter Ransom Castle?' So I fetched ye, an' hayr ye be, snug an' cozy, an' still worritin' about a passel o' cussed black-legs as ar' chasin' ye, and givin' ye trouble. Great gran'mothers! I do wish my boy Luke were hayr. He's only a small, leetle cuss o' fifteen, is my Luke, but a right peart sensible lad, fer all that, an' he has a smashin' way o' gittin' inter the graces o' the female line. He's a rattler, an' no mistake. But Luke's rarely ever at hum, o' late year. Off up nor' wi' a party o' fur-traders, last I heerd o' him. May be back sumtime atwixt this an' spring—may not; can't tell. But Luke's an honest one, ef I do say et, an' takes after his dad fer that. I'd never steal a pin whin I ked get my paws on a good rifle, or a cache o' peltry."

"I am very thankful for your kindness to me, sir," replied the young woman, drying her tears. "You are the only one who has shown me the least friendliness since I was turned from home and hunted down by my persecutors. But I fear you have made a grievous error in bringing me here. My enemies will be sure to find me, and they will show you no mercy, old as you are, because you sheltered me under your roof."

"Don't ye worr't about Old Zeke Ransom, my girly. He's better 'n six dead men, yit, ef he is past the sixty-third mile-post o' his life, an' can score a dozen funerals enny day, when Injun are plentiful. I opine his old eyes ain't too blind to crawl along a rifle-bar'l, an' ef yer enimies 'll only stan' off at a respectfull distance, hayr's w'at kin angelize 'em at the rate o' five a minute."

And the old hunter chuckled aloud, in anticipation of a good square scrimmage.

"No doubt your prowess is great, sir, but you little guess the odds against which you would have to cope. There were fifteen desperate men on my trail when I left Helena, headed by a bad, fearless man, whose whole life has been devoted to crime. These human bloodhounds will let *nothing* stop them—*nothing*! My death and the death of my children, yonder, is of vital importance to a certain person, and there is a matter of a million of dollars depending on my decease."

The old hunter gave vent to a prolonged whistle while he poked away at the roaring, crackling fire.

"A milyun? Phew! that's a heap of sponds, my gal. Reckon et 'd take a fellar an' eternity ter cotek beaver enuff ter amount to a milyun. What is yer story, marm? You needn't be afeared ter confidy in

Old Zeke Ransom, 'ca'se he'll never go back on yer seekerts."

"I might tell you," said the woman, musingly—"perhaps I will, presently; but, first, I must write—write that which will explain all, should my life be taken, and I feel that it will be, and that soon. Have you ink and paper?"

"Ink an' paper? Phew! I guess not, my lady. Them's luxuries we old Nor'-western cusses don't boast of, I calkylate. I've got a chunk of plumbago, hayr, though, an' yander in the chimbley jamb ar' sum white wrappin' paper w'at cum around sum tobaccy I got at Gocum. Reckon that's about my stock o' stashunary."

"Very well. I will try and make those articles answer my requirements."

Ransom procured the paper and lead, and then for more than an hour his strange guest busied herself in writing upon the coarse sheet.

Finally she concluded, and tied the result of her labor up into a little roll.

"This is my full history, so far as concerns any living person," she said, staring thoughtfully into the fire. "I have written it, that in the event of your death and mine, the world may know at whose door to lay our murder. Now, where can I put it, so that if we die, sir, some one else will find it?"

Old Zeke took the confession, and weighed it in his horny palm—then scratched his white old head, studiously.

"Reckon thar ain't much danger o' our turnin' up our toes, marm; but, still, ef you say so, I'll go an' put it inter my boy Luke's cache o' pelts, back in the wood, by the mountain. Most likely he'll be 'round to look after 'em toward spring, an'll find yer dockyment."

"Good. That will be just the plan. Go, sir, at once, for something seems to tell me that my enemies are drawing near, and their coming means death to us, I feel assured!"

In compliance with her wish Old Zeke seized a shovel, and thrusting the paper into his pocket, left the cabin, going out into the wild, wintry day.

There was not sufficient snow upon the earth to cover the prairie, but enough to fill the stinging air with frosty particles.

The clouds that skurried across the heavens were dark and grim; the sun had not shown its face for nearly a week, during which time the disagreeable weather had prevailed.

After an hour's absence old Zeke returned to the cabin.

He found his strange guest sitting before the fire, her twin babies now clasped to her breast. Dainty little bits of humanity they were, yet stout and healthy, and the very image of their mother.

"Twins?" queried Old Zeke, seating himself near to the fire, and rubbing his horny palms briskly, to restore circulation.

"Yes—a boy and a girl," replied the young woman, kissing them fondly.

"How old ar' they?—sixteen months?"

"Eighteen, yesterday. Poor little darlings! Cast upon the world so early in life, and homeless and nearly friendless! Would to God they had died when first born! it would have been a mercy to them—to me."

"Reckon you hain't got no husband, marm?" persisted the hunter, as he filled and lit his pipe.

"Husband? Ah, God help me, I have—no! not a husband, but a human brute—a demon in the guise of a man, who married me to attain his own devilish aims; then, when tired of me, cast me out upon the world, and set his associate fiends after me, to accomplish the death of me and my poor, innocent babes!"

"Husband! no! God spare the mark! He is all that is infernal—devilish! He is a rich man; a million dollars would not cover the value of his possessions. And his family name ranks among the highest in his State. He married me secretly, promising to make me the mistress of his house; but he proved

to be false, fickle, and brutal. He cursed me; he swore that these children—his children and mine—should never inherit a cent of his estates, which rightfully belong to them; he tried to murder me and them, but failed, after which he set his bloodhounds upon my track.

"My family were poor, common farmer-people, but between them and the family of my husband has always existed a deadly feud that only death can extirpate; and no sooner did my father learn of my marriage into the house of his most bitter enemy, than he drove me from under the roof of my birth—bade me go forever out of his sight, and his curse go with me! Thus it was that I was cast out upon the world by those that were once dear to me."

Old Zeke gave vent to a grunt, expressive of sympathy for the young mother and anger toward her persecutors.

"So you sot sail on your own hook, eh?"

"Yes. I had some money and many valuable gifts he had given me; and so I was able to flee from my enemies. But this did not satisfy my husband; he wished me dead, and my children dead, so that he would again be free to marry; and therefore he set his assassins after me. God only knows how I have tried and struggled to elude them, but all to no purpose—all to no purpose. They are still in hot pursuit, and something tells me that they are near, oh! so near."

"But I reckon they ain't, though, or else my eyesight ar' deceivin' me," said the old man, shuffling to the door, and gazing sharply over the dun, wintry plain. "Leastwise, thar ain't nothin' in sight—Yes thar is, by all the hides an' ha'rs on a mule's back!"

"What!" exclaimed the woman leaping to her feet in alarm. "Is it they—my enemies, already?"

"No, marm; et be only a drove o' deer, what my optics ar' restin' on."

"Thank heaven! I was sure you had espied my enemies."

"No, marm. I don't calkylate you'll see 'em to-day. Very few'd like to cross Twenty-Mile Stretch wi' the wind blowin' like forty bufflers, an' sich a stingin' temper'ture, too. But I must hev one o' them deer, fer sart'in, fer my larder ar' gittin' rather low, an' deer ain't so plentiful this winter as they might be. Jes' ye stay hayr an' mind the cabin, while I take my Punch-'em-Judy an' lay fer them ar' venisons."

The game in question, a drove of deer some eight or ten in number, were coming in toward the mountain, in a course that would take them north of the cabin. But, their gait was lagging, and as they were still some distance out, Old Zeke reasoned that he could waylay them in time to get a shot.

Therefore he took down a favorite rifle from the cabin-wall, tightened his belt, and opening the door stepped out into the chill, blustering day.

Alas! it was a fatal step; he had not gone ten paces from the door when a score of horsemen rode hastily out from behind the cabin, where they had been concealed.

Some were half-breed Indians, but the larger share were rough, sinister-looking fellows, well mounted and armed. The leader was a large, powerfully-built man of border type, perfect in muscular and physical development, and evil of countenance, with burning, blood-shot eyes, low, retreating forehead, and sensual mouth, while his straggling hair and beard were wildly tangled and disheveled. He, too, was well mounted, clad in buckskin, and loaded down with a small arsenal of weapons.

So swiftly and silently did the cavalcade emerge from their temporary hiding-place, that Old Zeke was in entire ignorance of his danger, until a terrified shriek from his strange *protegee* apprised him.

"Back—back! oh! God, too late!"

Wildly, on the breath of the cutting wind these words came to his hearing. He wheeled about to learn their meaning; then the crack of half a dozen

rifles rung out, and, pierced with as many bullets, the brave old hunter dropped in his tracks, his life-blood crimsoning the snow.

At the same instant a revolver-shot from the terrible leader laid the doomed mother a lifeless corpse in the doorway of that lone wilderness cabin.

CHAPTER II.

THE CONTEST.

SUNDAY in Deadwood—the great gala and business-day of the magic city.

The main street running through the gulch bottom, stretched out a mile and a half in length before you, closely lined on each side with shanties, some of them two-story frames, and respectably finished; while the hillsides above are covered with tents and cabins, promiscuously mixed.

Not less than five thousand men are concentrated in that long main street, and if in this great surging mass of humanity there is a white shirt or paper collar, it is not visible; if there is a pair of polished boots or shoes they are not to be seen; everything is rough, roaring and ready.

It is a successful first-class mining town at its "boiling point." We will force our way up through the surging crowd, "taking notes" as we proceed.

Here is a man mounted upon an inverted dry-goods box, holding a densely-packed crowd of a hundred or more about him, while he rattles off in a dashing, easy style, innumerable songs and witty parodies to the accompaniment of an old banjo, while an assistant drives a flourishing trade with the audience, his stock being "beetle p'izen," and, as these pestiferous insects are very troublesome in the Hills, taking the place of the tuneful mosquito, the article finds ready sale.

Further on an auctioneer is trying in vain to talk into some valuation a worn-out and superannuated pony. A little further, and we hear the strains of a concert of fiddles issuing from a large, barn-like edifice, the whole front of which is open to the street. A glance within shows a bar thirty feet long, from behind which all kinds of liquid decotions are dispensed at fifty cents a drink, the drinkers tendering in payment tickets previously purchased, each of which entitles the holder to "one dance with the gals," a bevy of whom are present.

The fiddlers are mounted upon a rostrum at the rear end, while a space twenty feet square immediately in front of them is reserved for dancing purposes; and in this reserved spot dainty slippers and stoga boots unite in giving variations to everything attempted in the Terpsichorean line by the "orchestra." Some of the "gals," to secure freedom of motion, doubtless, are blooming either in tights or bloomers, with shorter skirts than even Amelia Bloomer, herself, would have approved of.

The next general rendezvous is the gambling-hell—a liquor-bar on one side, and all the rest of the space taken up by faro-banks, monte-tables, and other schemes on the part of those who do not work to plunder those who do. Such dens are ever crowded. A constant stream of gold is flowing in at the weigher's stand, at the end of the bar; while the stack of "chips" which are being handled, and the piles of buckskin purses on deposit at the card-table—immediately around which the intensely interested votaries are as closely packed as if welded together—forcibly illustrate the old saying, that "the fool and his money are soon parted."

The Sabbath-day in Deadwood is the golden harvest of the week for everybody who has anything to sell. The street outside is jammed with humanity, and the groceries, clothing-stores, and all other business houses are crowded with customers.

The miners have "come in to lay in supplies."

To a structure on the mainstreet of this wild city of gold, we would conduct the reader who is to follow the guidance of our pen through this strange,

eventful drama in real life. The "Tabernacle" is the name of the place, as is announced by a huge banner-sign hung out over the sidewalk, and as we approach, we can readily guess its vocation, from the shouts of laughter and clinking of glasses. It is a saloon; reported to be the finest in Deadwood.

Inside, all is indeed luxurious, compared with the other dens. The floor is carpeted with matting, the chairs are cushioned richly, and the tables elegantly carved and furnished. The walls are literally a panorama of costly mirrors; cluster chandeliers hang from the elaborately frescoed ceiling; the half-breed waiters are in uniform and numbered; the bar has a choice stock of liquors, if a choice stock were a possible thing in Deadwood.

Old Jack Ferguson, from Virginia City, kept the place, and a place controlled by this veteran of "the bar," was as orderly as it was possible to keep a "ranch" in a mining-town.

The *habitués* of the Tabernacle were, for the most part, men who minded their own business; but, occasionally, there was a spree, and no help for it.

Extra attractions were not infrequently offered as an inducement for pilgrims to visit this "howtell."

On the Sunday of which we write, the place was crowded, to witness a wrestling match between a young Denver athlete, named Drayton, and a "professional," named St. Elmo.

St. Elmo was a spare, but iron-framed fellow of four-and-twenty, with tremendous muscular powers, and apparent fierce temper. His adversary, Walt Drayton, or Wrestling Walt, as he was called, by one and all, was barely twenty, if, indeed, he had attained that age, and possessed of a finely-molded form, muscular and symmetrical in limb and body. Practice and exercise, in addition to a careful attention to food and sleep, had put the young athlete in to a physical condition which any man in Deadwood might justly have envied. His face was smooth, frank and pleasant—in a word, handsome. His eyes were brown, like his hair, which was clipped close to the skull.

Both men were attired in tights, and mingled freely with the vast audience, for the contest was not to begin for an hour, and an hour is an interminable space of time to a thirsty, anxious assemblage.

Various were the comments passed upon the wrestlers, as they sauntered separately about, by the rude, uncouth miners, and the men-about-town.

One old fellow in particular passed his opinion rather freely upon the merits of the twain, and as no one disputed his declaration he was king cock of the walk. In stature he was about of medium height, as straight as an arrow, and the very embodiment of iron solidity and muscle.

He was clad from his stoga boots to the very chin in buckskin, old and greasy, probably having seen years of service, and in the belt about his waist was a small arsenal of revolvers and knives.

Little of his face, except the straight nose and the black, magnetic eyes, could be seen on account of his tremendous red beard and the shock of tangled, matted hair that grew down low onto his forehead. As if to add to his already comical appearance, a battered, mud-splashed "plug" hat surmounted his head, or rather was tipped to the very furthest limits, on one side.

And this individual paraded himself promiscuously about, without care for whom he jostled or whose corns he encroached upon.

"Ker-whoop!" he yelled, stopping in the center of a little crowd near the wrestlers' platform; "hayr I am! Right hayr's the snortin', pawin', trottin', squawkin' stallion o' Pertater Gulch. I cum frum Pertater Gulch, pilgrims, I do, bet yer dirty shirt on thet! I'm a rattler, I am—a gennywine rattler an' thet's why they call me Old Rattlesnake. Now, fur instance, I'll illustrate."

And the eccentric miner gave a strange, peculiar

laugh, while at the same time he emitted from down in his throat a horrible rattling noise, not unlike the death-rattle of a dying person and the dread warning of the most poisonous of reptiles, the rattlesnake.

"Thar, now, ain't thet snakyfied, my pilgrim bruthern? I allurs *rattle* when I feel inclined ter chaw off sumbody's ear, or take a hand at dentistry. Whoop 'em up, Eliza Jane! Hayr's ther hoss thet can show his pedigree, an' trot a mile in less time 'n it takes fer old Jack Fergusen to pour out a glass o' tarant'ler juice. Walk up, now, any o' ye frisky colts thet wants ter pace a mile wi' me, in three-quarters o' a second!"

"Perhaps ye'd better take a leetle exercise wi' one o' them 'ar, old man!" remarked a bystander, indicating Drayton and St. Elmo. "Spect you orter be able ter chaw an ear off 'm them, eh?"

"Whoa! Eliza Jane. What d'ye say, pilgrim? kin I trot wi' them geldings? Kin I equalize my paces wi' them—me, ther great frisky stallion frum Pertater Gulch? Waal, I opine. Uster c'u'd 'rastle wi' enny o' ther boys; but these old j'int's ain't as young as they uster be; still hayr's w'at kin trot a mile in two hours and forty minutes, an' w'en ye cum ter rattlin'—oh! whoop 'em up, Eliza Jane, I'm *thar*. *Rattle*? Guess I can. I got a-rattlin', down in Pertater Gulch so hard once, thet ther folks got skeert: thort an orful bail-starm war upon 'em. Ag'in, once, over at Bozeman, I drew a great crowd around ther shanty whar I was stoppin'; they jest cum an' forked over their two bits, as natteral as life, fer they thort 'twar a minstrel show, an' thet I war playin' on the bones. That's only an eppysode, howsumever. Once, up at Spearfish I did sumthin' that beats clockwork inter infinity.

"But I ain't a-goin' ter tell ye about *thet*, now. I'm jest goin' ter ax thet young feller wi' the piraty mustash ef he wants ter chaw off my ear?"

And true to his word the old fellow waltzed across the floor to where St. Elmo was leaning idly against a card-table, toying with a massive gold ring upon his fore-finger. Up close to the wrestler went the miner, then he paused, and, in a half squatting position, peered up into the other's dark, Spanish face—a face, once seen, rarely to be forgotten.

"Whoop 'em up, Eliza Jane!" roared the Rattler, giving his peculiar warning, and flapping his great buckskin-gloved hands up and down; "hayr I am, sar, ther great stallion wi' a pedigree—the great Thomas K. Cat frum Pertater Gulch, an' ef ye don't b'lieve it, jest bite a hunk outen my ear; poke yer finger at me, an' see me hump up my back; step on my toe an' heer me me-e-e-ow! Fer ther Lord's sake, do somethin' ter releve me o' my agony!"

St. Elmo gazed at his confronter in contempt, not deigning so much as a word, or a smile, at the amusing antics of the old fellow.

"Cum! cum!" snorted he, prancing about, and giving creditable imitations of a horse's whinny, "ain't ye goin' ter tread on my toe, or knock off my hat, or bite my ear, or tickle me in the ribs, or spit in my face, or—or—"

"Get out!" said the wrestler, angrily. "What do you come here with your nonsense, for? What do you want with me?"

"What do I want, pilgrim? What wanteth this me-e-e-owing Thomas K. Cat frum the sacred precincts o' Pertater Gulch? Why, sar, I want ter 'rastle wi' ye—I want'er throw your heels over yer head so quick ye won't have time to wink. That's Old Rattlesnake's wants, bet yer pile."

"And what you will be likely to want, for all me!" said the wrestler, turning away, as if disgusted with the proposition. "I did not come here to wrestle with all Deadwood."

"Oh! didn't ye?" exclaimed the man from Potato Gulch, squinting one eye, and ejecting a stream of tobacco-juice after the athlete. "Oh! Eliza Jane, whar ar' ye? Hello! hayr's the uther pilgrim. I'll see what's ther size o' his caliber; bet yer stakes he's my goose, so watch an' see me cook 'im."

At this juncture Wrestling Walt sauntered along, and straight up to him pranced the "Rattler-frum-Potato-Gulch," and slapped him on the shoulder.

"I sayee, pilgrim, I'm ther greatest Thomas K. Cat in all Deadwood!" was the initiatory declaration that greeted the wrestler—"ther very greatest am I—a reg'lar half-an'-half 'tween Maltese an' Cochin Chiny; an' ef ye doubt my word, just step on my toe and hear me me-e-e-ow!"

"Well, old man, who said you wasn't?" demanded Drayton, laughing, good-humoredly, at the laughable appearance of the other. "I am sure no one disputes your word."

"Waal, no; but ye parseeve I want it distinctly understood who I am. Now I want to 'rastle, side-holt, back-holt, frunt-holt, or enny other holt—that's *me*; an' ef ye ain't no objections, I'd select you as my goslin'!"

"Pshaw, old man, you'd only get hurt; besides I never wrestle, 'less under wager that *pays*, and I don't judge by your hat that you're overly well-stocked with money."

"Ye don't? Ye don't think by ther old Rattlesnake's hat that he's full o' chips? Whoop 'em, Eliza Jane! Thar's whar ye make a mistake uv ther caliber o' yer feller-man. I can fight; I kin trot an hour in two miles 'n' forty minutes; I kin rattle, squeal, bite, kick, run, swear, chaw terbacker, drink tarant'ler-ju'ce, an' me-e-e-ow-ow-ow-w! an' I kin show ther biggest nugget in this 'ere ranch!" and to back his assertion, the eccentric individual from Potato Gulch held up to the gaze of all a nugget of pure, shining gold about the size of a man's fist.

It was a wonderful sight, and with cries of astonishment, a crowd instantly collected around him.

"That 'ar!" cried the miner, triumphantly, "ar' only a specimen, pilgrims. Thet hain't a sarcumstance ter what's left whar this cum from. Oh! Eliza; wilt thou say I ain't got enny chips, now? Thet nugget weighs twenty ounces, gentlemen, an' ef ye don't b'lieve et, why just step on this Maltese kitten's tail, an' hear 'im me-e-e-ow, me-e-e-ow!"

"I say, old man, where did you get that nugget?"

The speaker was a large-built, military-looking personage, with bushy side-whiskers and sinister cast of countenance, who had been attracted to the spot by the surprised cries of the others.

"What's thet ter you?" demanded Old Rattlesnake, sharply. "Wouldn't you like ter know, so's you could go an' pick up a few just like it? Whoop 'em up, 'Liza! 'Tain't every fool's 's born fer luck. I say, you wrestlin' cuss, d'ye wanter scratch my back, *neow*?"

"Yes; I'll agree to break yer neck, if you'll put up that nugget for stakes," replied Wrestling Walt, with a laugh.

"Done. Ef you win, ther hunk is yours. Ef I win, I'm goin' ter bite off yer nose, an' then hev ther privelege o' me-e-e-owin' like a kitten. Ar' thet squar?"

"Perfectly! Cum along onto the stage," replied the young wrestler, leading the way, a confident expression upon his genial face. He anticipated an easy victory over this eccentric individual from Potato Gulch.

And the crowd cheered loudly as the two took their places upon the stand, ready for the contest.

Old Rattlesnake had laid aside his belt and weapons, but still wore his greasy buckskin suit, while Wrestling Walt was attired in his tights, making the contrast somewhat startling.

"I'll bet the old pilgrim will get his neck broke!" cried the military chap once before referred to, as he took out a roll of bills from the pocket of his velvet vest.

"I'm agreeable!" responded a voice in his rear, and a youth—for he was little else—stepped forward, ready to cover the officer's wager. "What 'll you bet?"

"Hello!" the major stared. He had not expected to be taken up at his offer.

"Who are you, young man?"

"That does not matter. Who or what I am does not matter to *you*. If you wish to bet that the old galoot will get his neck broke, I'm your huckleberry to any tune in long meter."

"Well! well!" drawled the officer, surveying his accoster sharply. "You've no lack of cheek, that's positive! So you want to bet, do you? Well, plank your chips. Here, give 'em to this other wrestler to hold—a hundred dollars, if you please."

"Git out!" cried the young man, contemptuously. "I wouldn't trust my ducats in that galoot's paws. Sides, I wouldn't bet short ov a thousand."

"Phew!" The major was truly amazed. "You haven't got a thousand cents, I'll wager!"

Out came the youth's right hand from the pocket of his buffalo-skin trowsers, and in it he clutched a roll of greenbacks, even larger than the officer's.

"There's my ducats, pilgrim; so if you've a notion o' riskin' a thousand, just lay it into the hands of old Jack Fergusson, here," and he nodded to the grim, rough proprietor of the "Tabernacle," who stood hard by, and had heard the proposal.

Accordingly the required sum was deposited with the veteran, and then a signal was given for the wrestling to begin, for Wrestling Walt had been waiting for the consummation of the bet.

The youth who had thus put up his money against the major's was in many respects remarkable, even among the more remarkable tide of civilization in this outlandish Black Hills metropolis.

And this was largely owing to his attire, which would have attracted attention anywhere.

The coat and breeches, met at the knees by fringed leggings, were made of buffalo-skin, with the furry side out; the vest was of red velvet; the moccasins upon his feet were skillfully wrought in fantastic designs with Indian bead-work; the broad-brim slouch hat upon his head was stuck full of scarlet feathers.

In fact, this youth was really handsome, the features being bold and regular, the eyes black and piercing, the mouth expressively pleasant, yet withal firm and resolute set, and the hair golden, and hanging in long curls over his shoulders.

He was not generally known in Deadwood; yet a few inquiring ones had ferreted out the fact that he was a wonderful pistol-shot, coming from up in the far Northwest, somewhere near the British lines, and that his name was Buffalo Ben.

The wrestling now began.

The contestants clinched, side-hold, with arms about each other's waist, and then came the exhibition of skill in the art of wrestling, if such manly sports can justly be classified among the arts.

Back and forward weaved the two wrestlers, each using all the feints and attempts to trip, within their power.

And speedily it dawned upon the minds of the spectators, that Old Rattlesnake was no easy man to handle, for, though Wrestling Walt put forth his master efforts, he could not get his adversary off his feet.

"Whoop 'em up, 'Liza Jane!" the eccentric genius from Potato Gulch would roar between breaths. "Hyar's the old Thomas K. Cat, yit, an' ye ken't throw him—"

Alas! the words were hardly spoken, when the young wrestler discovered an unguarded point, and quickly seizing the opportunity; he raised the miner bodily in his muscular arms, and pitched him headlong from the stage, out among the audience. He went down with a thud, and lay for a moment like one dead; but the next instant he regained his feet, and shook himself like some great mastiff.

"I'm satisfied!" he grunted, casting a grim glance around him; "I ain't no hog that don't know when he's got enough—no sir-ee!"

CHAPTER III.

OLD ENEMIES FACE TO FACE.

"THERE; who won the bet?" demanded Buffalo Ben, turning to Fergusson, simultaneously with the

major. "I bet that the old galoot would not git his neck broke, and neither he did, so the chips are mine."

"The devil they are!" cried the major, endeavoring to elbow his adversary to one side. "I won fairly; the cuss got floored, and that right handsomely, too, and the stakes are mine."

"I reckon they ain't!" retorted the young man, grimly, apparently not in the least awed by the other's important bluster. "I won 'em, an' win 'em's keep 'em, 'round this ranch, ef I know myself."

"Curse you, will you contradict me?" roared the major all aflame with rage. "Get out of my path, or I'll—I'll—"

"Now, what will you do?" coolly asked Buffalo Ben, folding his arms, and gazing at his towering confronter in expressed contempt. "What will you do?"

"Bravo! hurra for the boyee!" roared Old Rattlesnake, admiring the youth's pose. "What'll ye do, pilgrim—chaw off his ear, or step on his tail, and hear him me-e-eow?"

"This is what I'll do!" cried the angered officer, aiming a heavy blow at the youth's breast. "Take that, you contemptible cur, and let it teach you a lesson not to interfere in others' business."

But the clinched fist only cut the air, for Buffalo Ben leaped lightly to one side, and then, with the quickness of a cat, he administered a slap across the major's mouth with the flat of his hand, that resounded loudly throughout the room.

"Hurra! me-e-eow!" shouted the man from Potato Gulch, prancing about in wildest delight. "Oh! Eliza, give him another, pilgrim—jest one more, fer yer uncle."

"I think that will answer all purposes," replied Buffalo Ben, still on his guard.

And his words seemed true. A moment the major stood glaring malignantly at the young scout, then he walked away, muttering inaudible threats.

"Whoop-la! whoop 'em up. 'Liza Jane!" sung the man from Potato Gulch. "One game rooster licked, by thunder! Cock-a-doodle-doo-o-o-o!" Hayr's a case o' non-compismentus for ye. Me-e-eow. One brave sojer persuaded to abandon pugilism—one brass-buttoned guvynormentalist eternally glorified."

"You slapped the wrong man across the speakin' trumpet, then, me lad!" said Old Jack Fergusson, as he placed the stakes in the youth's hands. "He may seem vanquished, now, but he'll give you a dig in the ribs, yit, mark my word."

"So? Well, I shall be on my guard," was the careless reply. "Who is the swell, anyhow?"

"That man is Major Fawdon. He stands high in favor in the army, and has influence that ain't to be sneezed at."

"Waal, that don't scare this fellow, not one whit. 'Long's he keeps on his side o' the trail, all right; when he gits ont'er my side, I'll h'ist him off, bet yer chips! I ain't no rag fer army officers ter wipe their feet on."

"Bully for you, boyee!" and admiration and enthusiastic joy beamed from the veteran's eyes. "Bully for you. I glory in your spunk, I do; but, don't go 'bout wi' yer optics closed, now, mind, or you'll come up missing!" and then he wheeled and ambled back to his bar, to dispense decoctions to the thirsty throng, leaving Buffalo Ben standing staring thoughtfully at the floor.

The wrestling match between Drayton and St. Elmo was now on the tapis, and the space in front of the platform was crowded full of excited humanity, who were eager to witness the sport.

The two men, standing together, were wonderfully developed in muscular and physical strength, and their forms were set off to advantage in the flesh-tights, exhibiting in prominence all the masterly curves and contours.

"What prognosticating pilgrim sez he wants ter bet twenty milyun dollars ag'in' this yere nuggit o'

a'riferous stuff, that the feller w'at cafluxminxed me won't win the race? Oh! Eliza Jane, whar are the dirty son-of-a-gun that wants ter bet? Twenty milyun ag'in' a nuggit o' gold! Whar's the indivi-dual what wants to bet?" howled the man from Potato Gulch, dancing around promiscuously, and apparently endeavoring to make himself a source of annoyance to everybody. "Hayr I am, ther great Thomas K. Cat o' ther Angel-Saxon breed—ther great roarin', snortin' stallion wi' a pedigree. And I want to bet some ornery galoot jest one twenty-ounce gold nuggit ag'in' twenty milyun dollars, thet Wrastler Walt's goin' ter errupt thet piraty-mustached skunk like Lavy errupts Vessuvyus. Oh! the ongainly, ornery buzzard! He war afeard ter tackle a hog o' his own caliber, war he? Hope ter thunder he'll git his ijees jounced 'way inter the middle o' next year, like I did! Oh! bruthern, I know—I've bin thar, bet yer false teeth; I've seen ther starry firmament—saw et but a few minutes ago, an'—"

"See here, are you going to shut up, and make less noise?" demanded old Jack Fergusson, coming from behind the bar with a loaded horse-pistol in each hand. "I don't want ter make an obituary in ther columns o' ther *Pioneer*, but shall have to ef ye don't put a stopper inter thet bread-trap o' yours."

"Oh! Eliza!" groaned he from Potato Gulch, in an agony of spirit, as he squirted a stream of tobacco-juice reflectively at a fly which had alighted upon a neighboring card-table, "hes et come ter this, thet a poor cuss ar' forbidden freedom o' his speaking facilities?"

"Ye can talk ter a certain extent," retorted Fergusson, "but we positively *do* refuse to have too much gab."

"Amem!" said the Rattlesnake, solemnly, and he turned his attention to the wrestlers, apparently resigned to his lot.

And the contest now began. It was to be for the championship of the Black Hills, the stakes being a hundred a side, and a handsome belt, gold-mounted and its clasp adorned with two diamond stars. It was a magnificent affair, and well worth a struggle to obtain.

The start was side-hold, St. Elmo having the preference of the right side. Back and forward they stepped in their tremendous hug, feinting, tripping, parrying, but neither gaining a point. Once Wrestling Walt came near going upon his knees, but he quickly saved himself, and received a storm of applause from the intensely interested assemblage. It was doubtful how the tide was going to turn.

St. Elmo was not nearly so cool as his adversary. He was more fierce of temper and had less patience. It fretted him not to gain; it enraged him to lose.

Then, too, his eyes were sometimes riveted upon the spectators, as if to learn whom their sympathy was with, for he was jealous lest it should be centered upon his contestant.

In vain did each of the wrestlers practice upon the other all the tricks known to them; 'twas no use, however, for at the end of an hour both were standing as when they commenced.

"Come! come!" roared the man from Potato Gulch, at last, unable longer to stand the pressure, "why don't ye adjourn ter business? Git yer back up an' me-e-ow like a Thomas-cat; get mad, an' pull each other's ha'r!"

"Shall we throw up the sponge?" demanded veteran Jack Fergusson, from behind the bar. "Thar's no use o' yer 'ras'lin' forever."

"No sponge for me!" cried Wrestling Walt, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "One of us has got to lay down here, afore the show is over, 'less the Saint, here, wants to cave."

"Have I caved yet?" was the other wrestler's answer, in a fierce tone. "Go ahead!"

And the struggle recommenced.

Backward, forward and sidewise they went, watching each other's feet as narrowly as the cat watches

the mouse; bracing, parrying and tripping; St. Elmo inwardly cursing his luck, Drayton calm and studious.

But it could not last forever. Suddenly Wrestling Walt caught his man at a disadvantage, and in a second he bore him heavily to the floor, 'mid thundering shouts of applause.

"Hurra! hurra!" shrieked the eccentric individual from Potato Gulch, capering about and acting more like a lunatic than anything else, "cock-a-doodle-doo-o-o-oo! me-e-ow! Whoop 'em up, 'Liza Jane, Warn't thet done purty? Warn't that the essence o' all 't's beautiful? Oh! Eliza, my blushing primrose, w'ar art thou, now?"

Wrestling Walt allowed his adversary to rise; then he extended his hand.

"Shake, pardner; you needn't git mad, for you had the same chance as I!"

"I care not for your friendship," replied the vanquished athlete, bitterly, as he pulled on his velvet coat preparatory to leaving. "You won, and maybe it's all right, and, again, maybe it ain't; keep your hand; I don't want it."

"All correct, sir; you needn't take it. I bear you no ill-will, and hope it is the same with you. Whenever you want another friendly tussle, hunt me up."

St. Elmo nodded his head, and wended his way out of the "Tabernacle."

"Long tunes in short-meter!" exclaimed Old Rattlesnake, following him with his piercing gaze. "That galoot's got a thistle in his crop, bet yer boots. Reckon I know him, or else I'm mistaken."

The crowd now rapidly dispersed, after paying their respects at the bar, for if there was any excitement elsewhere they meant to find it. Among them went the gentleman from Potato Gulch, his tongue ever moving faster than his stoga-booted feet.

That evening the young scout, Buffalo Ben, while sitting in the Tabernacle, and idly watching the comers and goers, received a start, upon the entrance of a man into the saloon. Not that there was anything remarkable in the appearance of the individual, but because he evidently recognized him. A short, heavy-set person, dressed in citizen's clothing, was all; yet the youth's eyes lit up with fire as he beheld him.

The face, though coarse and bloated, was decidedly womanish, and the hair flowing down upon the shoulders was almost too fine and abundant to adorn one of the male sex. Yet as such was the person dressed, and not one out of ten would have suspected the gender in this new-comer that walked up to the bar and called for drink.

"Ha!" was Buffalo Ben's involuntary exclamation, as his hand sought his belt.

"So this is my game in a new harness. I wonder if any one recognizes Silver Sal, of 'Slop-Bucket' notoriety in that disguise! Few, it's likely; but I am not so easily fooled. Now is my chance, and she shall not elude me!"

After pouring down a glass of the stuff they call brandy, in Deadwood, the stranger gave a careless glance about the saloon; then turned and left as quickly as he had come. But not unwatched.

Like a sleuth-hound Buffalo Ben glided after him, and the two stepped into the black, moonless night—moonless, because the sky was overcast with ominous clouds that had collected during the afternoon.

Instead of keeping up through the main street, Silver Sal made a cut direct for the steep hillside, where myriads of twinkling stars through the night's somber veil located many a miner's tent or shanty.

Like a shadow did Buffalo Ben keep in pursuit, his steps inaudible to his hurrying enemy. He gained swiftly, until at last he was able to lay his left hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Halt! move at your peril!" was followed by the significant click! click! of a revolver.

The disguised songstress wheeled about with a curse. Her forehead came in contact with the revolver's muzzle as she did so.

"Steady, now!" warned the youth's voice, the ring in it betraying sternness and resolve. "You've gone far enough at present, Silver Sal; the Bosses of Boss Gals makes a presentable specimen o' manhood, but ain't supposed to be able to cope with men, for all. Do you know me, woman?"

"I'm no woman!" was the angry retort, in a hoarse, growling voice, meant as an imitation of a man's. "I reckon you're barking up the wrong tree, sir."

"Oh, no!" Buffalo Ben's voice was full of confidence. "I've been on the trail of my game too long for that. You're what they call Silver Sal, here in Deadwood. Up in Idaho you were dubbed Fatty Greene; over in the British Possessions you were happy in the name of Mrs. Sally Falkland!"

Another curse; then a motion as if to break away and run.

"Oh, no!" said the youth, again pressing harder with the revolver, "don't try to run or I'll salt you, sure's I'm Ben Jerome. You know I'm no slouch with a pistol. Now, then, that after the lapse of over a year we have met, you must tell me where to find my sister Belle!"

"In the grave, curse her!" was the sullen reply. "Would to God you were there, too."

"No doubt you would like to see me there, but I ain't on the death list, at present. You've got to tell me where she is, so you may as well do it first as last, for I'm going to hold you till you do."

"She's *dead*, I tell you! How many times must I repeat it?"

"You need not repeat it at all, for I know it is a black lie. You know me, Silver Sal; they say I'm a pretty hard customer when I'm riled. So you better unburden yourself right off, before I get upon my ear. I wouldn't much hesitate to blow the roof off your head, you've given me so much trouble."

"I'll unburden myself of nothing. I'm well aware I kidnapped the girl; I don't deny it. I thought I could make her dance and kick money into my pocket, but I mistook her. She didn't have any gumption about her, and when I'd mauled her about a week or so, she took sick and died, an' you can bet I was glad of it. She hadn't no talent fer theatricals an' the stage."

"No, probably not, of the kind you bring inter use," was the sarcastic reply. "But I still disbelieve you; you have her concealed somewhere. Come! This parley is simply useless. *Where is she?*"

"Lying in the graveyard at Cheyenne."

"You lie!"

"No; as God is my judge, I am telling the truth!" declared the woman. Apparently she was in deep earnestness.

"Again I swear you lie!" cried Buffalo Ben fiercely, his eyes blazing like lurid coals of fire. "I know you of old."

"Well, what if I do lie? What if Belle Jerome is alive?" demanded the woman, a sneer perceptible in her speech. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to make you tell or—"

"Or what?"

"Kill you, and cut your heart out."

"Bah! I don't fear ye. Kill ef you choose; one may as well die at one time as another."

"Very well. By killing you, if Belle is alive I shall rid her of her greatest enemy. I shall count three; if you don't speak, *three* means death. *One!*"

A brief pause, then the cool tones of the youth spoke the ominous—

"*Two!*"

He would have counted three, but at this juncture he was suddenly seized from behind and thrown to the ground.

With a cry of affright Silver Sal bounded away, and disappeared in the black gloom of the night!

CHAPTER IV.

MASKED MAUDE—DEADWOOD DICK.

SEARCHING among the heterogeneous population of the Black Hills mining-towns, you are liable to find almost every known phase of character; you need not marvel at any personal or characteristic phenomenon, that suddenly presents itself. In the country of gold you can find any one you want, from a desperado to a saint; from a beggar to a millionaire; from an organ-grinder to a fortune-teller—and it is of one of this latter class that we are about to write. "Masked Maude" they called her, because her face was ever hidden behind a black mask; and what any one knew of her was of little consequence.

She had come to Deadwood, one morning, on the stage, and launched out into business instantaneously, having bought and paid for a fifteen-by-thirty shanty, almost under the shadow of the Metropolitan, and stuck out her shingle—

"MAUDE VAN BUSKIRK,

"Fortune-Teller, etc."

What the "etc." was calculated to imply, is hard to state; but it was there, to be read and re-read by Deadwood's wondering inhabitants.

Further information was gratuitously added, that "Madam Van Buskirk would only receive visitors at certain times of the day and week, Tuesdays and Fridays being the periods for 'reception.'"

On the Friday previous to the Sunday of which we have just been writing, the madam had a customer.

He came down the gulch from one of the hotels, and paused in front of the door of the fortune-teller's shanty. Glancing up at the ungainly sign, a sarcastic smile wreathed his lips.

He was a large, heavy-set man of perhaps forty-five, or maybe more, with a full sweeping beard, silvered with many a gray thread; an intellectual forehead, and eyes piercing black in their intensity.

He was dressed in citizen's clothing, of elegant fit and texture; his whole personal appearance spoke of wealth and high standing in the world.

He walked with a cane, but evidently not because it was a necessity.

"So! this must be the place that I seek," he observed, glancing a second time at the sign. "I wonder if her ladyship is in, and ready for business?"

He gave a heavy rap on the door, and then waited. At first there was no sound of stir inside; but, presently, some one approached the door, undid the fastenings, and Masked Maude stood upon the threshold, a small revolver in her shapely white hand.

She was so masked that no part of her face could be seen; her hair long and of auburn hue fell over her shoulders in great profusion. In stature she was a trifle above the medium of women, but in her magnificent costume of purple silk, she looked royally grand.

The stranger raised his hat politely, as he beheld the woman; bowed, and then said:

"Ahem! do I see the woman they call Masked Maude—the fortune-teller?"

"You do," was the reply, in a sweetly pleasant voice; "will you come in?"

"Well, yes"—with a little laugh. "I have a trifling amount of business to transact with you, and I prefer it should be done within your shanty, than out."

"Certainly; walk in," and the graceful fortune-teller led the way into the shanty, which served her both as office and dwelling.

It was but a single room, and furnished with the rude simplicity of a miner's taste—a table, a few chairs, a cot-bed in one corner, a second-hand stove, a stock of rifles and other weapons hung against the wall.

"Be seated, please," said Masked Maude, motioning her visitor to a chair, "and state your errand

at once, for time is worth gold to me. Your name is—"

And taking up pen and ink, she waited to enter it in a large book that lay upon the table.

"What difference does it make what my name is?" demanded the man uneasily, while he stroked his beard with a nervous hand. "That need not be mentioned in our business transaction."

"However that may be, I must have your name," was the firm reply. "I deal with no one whose name I do not know. Not for particular use, you know, but as a guarantee of good faith."

"Well, then, it is Aaron Wadsworth."

"Aaron Wadsworth," repeated the fortune-teller, writing in her great book. "Aaron Wadsworth. Where from?"

"The East."

"Of course; any one might know that. Now, what would you with me? Want your fortune told, I suppose."

"On the contrary, I do not. I do not believe in any such fol-de-rol. Why I came here, I can easily explain. Up at the hotel I was told that you were literally a world's directory; that it required only the asking, and you could tell a person the whereabouts of any other person. It is because of this that I have come to you. I want you to tell me the present whereabouts of Deadwood Dick."

The woman started.

"Why do you wish to know?" she asked, eying her visitor keenly through the holes of her mask. Evidently she was trying to evade a direct answer to the question.

"Because I do. You can tell me where I can go to find him."

"Oh, no!" with a strange laugh. "If I knew where Deadwood Dick is, I could earn a thousand dollars reward, or more. You're on the wrong tack, pilgrim."

"Bah! you are fooling me!"

"In your imagination, yes. Deadwood Dick is a person whose market value increases with age—whose habitual watchfulness and caution grow stronger each day that passes. If you would find him, you will have to explore the countless fastnesses of the Black Hills."

"Is that so?" The stranger seemed surprised. "I had no idea but what you could put me on his trail."

He arose and donned his hat.

"Is that all—the extent of your business with me?" Maude queried, rising also. "If you have a message, I might by some lucky chance see the Prince of the Road, or some of his band, even before you do."

Wadsworth reflected a moment.

"Yes," he said, finally; "if you see this young robber, tell him he will find it to his advantage to call upon J. Aaron Wadsworth, Room 4, Centennial Hotel. I will be there for one week."

"All right." Masked Maude jotted down the address in her book. "I will endeavor to get him the word, for which, including present consultation fee, I shall charge you fifty dollars."

"What!" Aaron Wadsworth was amazed. "Fifty dollars, ma'am? Why, that is extravagant—enormous!"

"It is my price, all the same," was the matter-of-fact rejoinder. "You can pay it, and then take your departure."

"But I won't!" the gentleman from the East declared, stoutly. "I am not to be humbugged by one like you."

"Then you may as well be seated," replied Maude, coolly. "You cannot leave this shanty till you shell out."

Wadsworth walked defiantly to the door, and turned the knob. The door was locked.

"Oh! you needn't think to escape," observed the masked woman, drumming on the table with the jeweled fingers of her left hand, while in her right she clutched a revolver already cocked. "Even

should you succeed in getting that door open, I'll salivate you with this,"—indicating the revolver.

"What! you wouldn't murder me?" gasped Wadsworth.

"Wouldn't I? Well, I ain't so sure about that. I reckon you will have to shell out the required fifty, or shed cold lead."

The stranger uttered a curse, and taking a roll of bills from his vest pocket, he counted out five tens.

"Thanks," the fortune-teller said, coolly, raking in the stamps, with a chuckle. "I judged by your looks that you could stand a large fee."

"Humph!" Wadsworth swelled up with importance. "Were your charges a half-million instead of fifty dollars, I could stand them and not wince. Now, release me."

"All you have to do is turn the knob and walk out," assured Maude, pointing to the door. "Go!"

"But it is locked."

"Try it and see."

Which he did, and found that it opened without resistance. Stepping outside he closed the door behind him, and made his way back toward his hotel.

When Buffalo Ben came to realize that he was a prisoner, he uttered something suspiciously like a curse. To be balked in plans that it had taken months to mature, was vexatious in the greatest degree.

His captors were masked, and twelve or fifteen in number, and he rightly came to the conclusion that they were road-agents.

What was their object in taking him a prisoner he could not imagine. Surely, it could not be for plunder, as he had not exhibited much money while in Deadwood, except when he had bet with the major.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, addressing one who appeared to be in command. "Why have you taken me captive; and who are you?"

"We're Deadwood Dick's Night-Hawks," replied Lieutenant Cambre, "and we snatched you just for a little fun while we're waitin' for the captain."

"Indeed? Well suppose you let me go in pursuit of that female friend," suggested Ben, "that is, if you've had enough fun."

"Not yet—not till the captain comes. He may want to see you."

"Why should he? He does not know me."

"Don't he? There is where you mistake. I've heard him speak of Buffalo Ben—and I reckon you are he."

"I am. But what did your captain say concerning me?"

"He always spoke of you as a fearless sort of a cuss. Said there ain't only one as can equal you with the revolver."

"And who is that?"

"Himself. Reckon the captain can sock lead about as true as the next one."

"So I heard." Ben never boasted of his own successful exploits, though he has won many a wager with a revolver. "Where is your captain now?"

"Over to the 'Met,' I reckon, or some'eres in that direction, tryin' to scare up danger. That chap can't live without he's all the time gettin' into danger."

"It would seem so if you believe what the *Pioneer* and *Miner* say. He's married, eh? Got a pretty wife?"

"You're just talkin', he hes—purty as any rosebud that ever blossomed. She lives in the sixth toll-gate twixt here an' Bozeman. Dick don't go there much; she mostly comes to see him."

At this juncture footsteps were heard rapidly approaching, and in a moment more the young road-agent chief came bounding into camp.

It was Deadwood Dick, the same as we have seen him in days gone by—Dick in his weird suit of black, with his black mask, gloves and hat;—the dashing, handsome, youthful prince of the road.

His eagle eyes pierced the gloom and took in the scene at a glance.

"Whom have you here, lieutenant?" he asked, quickly, nodding toward the captive scout. "Hal yes, I see—it's Buffalo Ben, eh? How came you to detain him, Cambre?"

"Just for to pass away time, captain. Shall we release him now?"

"No; we have no time to spare, for Old Roxly and his Regulators are after me. Fetch along your prisoner, and let us scoot lively, for the devils are out strong."

So saying, Deadwood Dick sprung on ahead into the darkness. The bonds around Ben's feet were cut, and then he was forced to accompany the road-agents, as they followed their leader.

All did not go in a body. They divided into twos and threes, and plunged off in various directions, all meeting half an hour later in a lonely spot on White-wood creek, a mile above town.

It was where the golden stream debouched from a black, narrow ravine, into which a man could barely force a passage, between the jagged rocks. Above towered mighty tree-fringed mountain crags; below the stream boiled and gurgled like the waters of a witch's caldron.

One by one the road-agents assembled at this point, some panting and breathless from a long, roundabout jaunt. Deadwood Dick was the last one to arrive, and a murmur of relief ran through the crowd when he came among them.

"I was fearful that ill had befallen you!" said Carlos Cambre. "Ha! what is the matter? Are you wounded?"

"Only a scratch—the loss of blood made me a trifle dizzy!" replied the chief, reeling even as he spoke. But he threw off the faintness with a master effort. "We're in for a scrimmage, boys. Old Alex Roxly and his Regulators are coming down on us, hot and heavy."

"Which way?"

"From all directions. They're scattered all through the town. A dozen or more of 'em dogged me till a few moments ago, when I threw them from the trail. But they'll soon nose us out."

"God forbid, in such a place as this. Here we are completely cornered."

"Ay! right; you are—and there come the devils now!" replied Deadwood Dick, as there was a glare of light from off in the darkness, and a storm of bullets rattled harmlessly over their heads.

CHAPTER V.

MAJOR FAWDON'S CLAIMANT.

In an upper parlor of the Centennial Hotel, J. Aaron Wadsworth was taking his ease, ensconced in a large cushioned rocker, his slippered feet elevated to a dangerous angle on a neighboring bookcase. His apartment was furnished in elaborate style for Deadwood, everything being of new and recent manufacture.

Upon a stand at his elbow were wine and cigars; the light was turned low, for it was evening, and a little fire burned in the grate.

This man, whose money he counted by tens of thousands, was not in a very good humor, for his brows were knitted in a scowl, his hands were clinched and his eyes were gleaming.

Nor did his scowl vanish at the entrance of a brawny man, of brutal aspect—a gray-haired, grizzled-looking wretch, with tremendous beard and deeply-scarred face—one who looked capable of any crime. His dress was buckskin, throughout, and he was armed to the teeth.

Wadsworth motioned him to a seat, without rising himself.

"So you have come, have you?" he growled, puffing harder at his cigar. "I think it's time; I've been in Deadwood ten days waiting for you. You must think a man's patience will last forever."

"Hain't tho't much about et," replied the giant,

seating himself on the opposite side of the little table and helping himself to wine and cigars without invitation. "Got here as soon as I could after gettin' yer letter sayin' as you's comin' West. Didn't hurry much, neither."

"I should say not!" with an increased scowl. "You're taking matters altogether too easy."

"And why shouldn't I? Hain't bound ter run an' obey every wiggle of your thumb. I used ter be your nigger, but times hev changed since sixteen years ago."

Wadsworth chewed the end of his cigar reflectively.

"I did play it rather shabby on you, that's a fact," he said, watching the wreaths of smoke curl upward. "But, then, five thousand dollars was a good bit to pay out, and you wouldn't take less."

"No; nary a durned cent less. You 'greed ter pay me the amount ef I'd do the job fer you, an' I went ter the 'spense on my own hook, ter git my men, an' hunt the trail. An' after I salted away the biggest share o' the game you backed out, an' refused to stick ter your bargain."

Wadsworth took the cigar from between his lips, and stared hard at the giant, a startled expression upon his features.

"I must misunderstand your meaning, Burk," he said; "you say, 'after I salted away the biggest share o' the game.' What did you mean by that?"

Bill Burk laughed, in a hoarse, mocking fashion. "Reckon I meant what I sed," was the reply. "I warn't sure any o' the time but what you'd play the shennnigan on me; so I killed the mother an' reserved the squallin' brats fer future use."

The man of money leaped to his feet, a horrible oath escaping his lips.

"You tell me this, you accursed devil?" he cried, his face all aflame with rage. "You tell me that you did not destroy her babes, as you promised—that they are yet living?"

"Exactly! precisely! positively that!" responded Burk, with a leer.

Wadsworth made no hostile demonstration as he received the, to him, startling intelligence. He dropped back in his chair and sat as motionless as an image, his gaze riveted accusingly upon the giant, hard, stern lines contracting his forehead.

"I believe you lie!" he said, at last, his tone cold and angry. "Had you this hold upon me, you would have been pretty apt to have made yourself manifest long ago."

"Oh, no!" the ruffian laughed, confidently. "I took my time as I always do. Nothin' ever hurries me. Had I wanted to, worry bad, I could 'a' made you humped, 'thout usin' the brats. Blackmail 'd 'a' been my weepin in that case; but then I warn't o' a werry revengeful dispersition, so I waited an' bided my time, well knowin' yer consence 'd bring you out here, afore you died. Ye couldn't rest ten year more wi'out knowin' fer sure w'at war my feelin's toward you, now could ye?"

"It was not so much that that brought me westward," replied Wadsworth. "I wanted change, excitement; so I came here. I remembered your address to be Helena, at your last writing to me; I sent for you to meet me here, but did not dream that you would bring me such news."

"Oh, I presume not," Bill Burk replied, with a yawn. "You s'posed you hed no heirs ter that million o' yourn—tho't you'd played a trump keerd an' won: but you got tuk back a peg in *that* calkulation. Thar'll be heirs enough in the market."

"See here!" Wadsworth bent forward, his small eyes gleaming, redly. "Could you trust me again, and at the same time could I trust you?"

"Waal, boss, that depends. S'posin' ye give a feller a geograffical ideer of what ye're drivin' at, an' then I'll put yer question ter probate, as the judges say."

"Exactly. Let us understand each other," assented Wadsworth. "In case I was to pay you the five thousand dollars, how then?"

"Waal, I'd hev ter see the chips first, an' then decide, afterwards. The more oats ye feed a hoss the livelier he ar'!"

"That is as much as to say, that as long as I buy you with gold, you are mine."

"Thet's about ther size of et."

"I'll buy you to a certain extent, but no further," he said, decidedly, as he took a small valise from beneath the table and unlocked it. Inside were several rolls of something well wrapped in silk oil-cloth, one of which he extracted and undid. Once the outside covering was removed, a roll of greenbacks was revealed, most tempting to the eyesight.

Bill Burk gave vent to a surprised grunt, as his vision was greeted with this unexpected display.

"You're full o' chips, ain't ye?" he observed, lighting a second cigar. "Reckon some bank's bin robbed, hey?"

"Not that I know of; why?"

"Because you're so flush o' stamps."

No reply was made to this, but the man counted out a number of bills from the package, and shoved them toward the giant.

"There are five thousand dollars," he said, gruffly.

"Now, can I rely on you to finish the job you commenced sixteen years ago—the job which must be finished at all hazards?"

"Reckon et would be well fer you to put another thousand along with this ter make all sure," grinned Burk, triumphantly.

Another thousand was accordingly counted out, and shoved across the table.

"There, does that appease your appetite?" demanded Wadsworth.

"To a T!" announced the other, rising. "I'll hunt up the game, by-an'-by. As fer ther present, I'm goin' ter git onto a glorious drunk, over my good fortune. Good-day ter ye, Mr. Wadsworth!"

And in another moment the giant had quit the room, leaving the scheming man of money to his reflections.

After Bill Burk's departure, Wadsworth sat for a long time with his face buried in his hands, nor did he arouse until he felt the presence of some living thing near him.

He then looked up to find a man standing before him with folded arms—one whom he did not remember ever having seen—clad in a hunter's costume, and armed with rifle and belt weapons. A brawny, handsome fellow he was, of three-and-thirty summers, the very picture of health and strength.

"Who are you?" demanded Wadsworth, scowling as only he could scowl. "What brings you here, where you are not wanted?"

"I don't know that it makes any difference to you particularly," responded the hunter, in a slow, drawling tone. "I reckon this are a free country, an' a feller can go whar he pleases, providin' he's got enuff elbow-grease to back him. S'pose you'd like ter have me trot out o' here, but I'll tarry a few seconds, while I tell you somethin'. Ef you listen wi'out interruption, I'll be done sooner. So heer goes:

"Once upon a time, which time war sum sixteen years ago, a brutal massacre war committed up in northern Montana. The victims war an old man an' a young woman, whose name war Wadsworth—Elvira Wadsworth, the legally wedded wife of J. Aaron Wadsworth of Pennsylvania. The survivors of the massacre, two infant children, were sold to a band of roving Indians, and carried North to the British lines, where they were reared to early man and womanhood, under the care of an old fur trader and his wife. Now, what I'm drivin' at, is, do you know where them heirs to the property of J. A. Wadsworth are?"

"No!" exclaimed the man of millions, eagerly, "but I would give a deal of money did I know. But a few short hours ago I supposed that they were dead, until I was told better by a faithless wretch

whom I once had in my employ. What do you know of them?"

"As much as I hev told you—no more," replied the hunter. "But if I find them, as I hope to, I shall warn 'em to fight shy of their fiend-father, for you ar' a fiend, ef thar be such things on earth, Aaron Wadsworth. Look out fer me. I'm huntin' an' searchin', night an' day, fer them children o' Elvira Wadsworth, an' when I find 'em, they're bound ter hev a chunk out o' your property, bet yer boots."

Whereupon the brawny son of the Northwest turned to depart.

"Hold!" said Wadsworth. "What is your name, man, that I may know whom I have for an opponent?"

"My name is Luke Ransom, sir—Lightning Luke they call me up Montana. Anything else you would like to know?"

"Nothing; you may go," was the reply. After the hunter's departure, Wadsworth sat studying the intricate threading of the carpet for nearly an hour.

"How is this thing going to end?" he asked himself over and over, his eyes emitting sparks of slumbering fire.

"After all my years of planning and plotting, am I at last to be baffled in my designs? No! I swore her children should not have a cent of my wealth, and even though I sacrifice it to the four winds of the earth, they shall not. They must perish, and if Bill Burk cannot do the job, *I can and will!*"

Apparently the unnatural father was terribly in earnest.

The next day on his return to his hotel from a long tramp among the mines, he found two visitors awaiting him in the parlor suit that had been assigned him.

The most noticeable of the twain was an army officer, in the uniform of a major, with luxuriant Burnsides and an impudent familiarity confined to a class of Uncle Sam's promoted boys in blue.

The major's companion was a young lady, deeply veiled—or, a girl, in other words, if her slight figure was any indication of her age. She was attired in a neat gray costume, and a diamond ring graced her forefinger.

The major rose as Wadsworth entered.

"Honorable J. Aaron Wadsworth, I presume!" he saluted, with a servile bow. "Allow me to introduce to you in this young lady, Miss Stella Wadsworth, my *protegee*. I am Major Fawdon, honorably retired from service."

"Ahem! yes, I see," said Wadsworth, considerably surprised, and at loss to fully comprehend. "How am I indebted to you for this interview?"

"I called on business," replied the major. "Sixteen years ago, Mr. Wadsworth, your wife was killed, by your order, and your babes, unknown to you, sold to a band of roving Indians. You have always supposed them dead, along with your wife, and you have lived as sinners are permitted to live, in the supposition that your estates would have no heirs. In this you were mistaken."

"One of your wife's children grew up to maidenhood, and was placed under my care by an old northern fur-trader, and I now take pleasure in presenting her for your inspection. Stella, my dear, raise your veil!"

The young woman obeyed, and the rich man's incredulous gaze fell upon a fair face, perfect in outline and sweet in expression—a face that an artist might worship, or that might become a poet's idol.

The hair was golden in hue, and fell over the pretty shoulders in profusion; the girl, as a whole, was remarkably pretty—for she was yet but a girl not out of her teens by three years.

"There!" the major exclaimed, enthusiastically, his eyes gleaming with exultance; "how like you the picture, Mr. Wadsworth? Do you not see before you the very image of the wife whose death you caused, years ago? Stella, dear, this is the father

of whom I have told you. What do you think of him?"

"As yet I haven't formed an opinion," replied the girl, eying the man distrustfully.

"And you, Aaron Wadsworth—what do you think of my claimant?"

"I recognize her," was the reply, without hesitation, "as Elvira's child and my heiress!"

But there was a tone of menace underlying his speech.

CHAPTER VI.

EVENTS OF A WILD, STORMY NIGHT.

"HA! ha!" laughed Deadwood Dick defiantly, as he perceived that none of his comrades had been injured by the volley of bullets. "Mates," he said, his voice betraying anxiety, "we're in a tight fix, an' no mistake. We ought to have come mounted, and then we could have shown these dogs our heels. But we didn't, and here we are, neatly cornered, and with only one way open to us for escape—namely, up this ravine, which, after a mile of tortuous winding, ends in the face of a big, craggy barricade. There is no use, then, for us to try to escape in this direction. All we can do is *fight*, and let every shot tell a tale to these Regulators that will never be forgotten!"

"Bravo, captain!" said Lieutenant Cambre, earnestly. "Let this teach 'em a lesson long to be borne in mind—that we're life even to the death."

And the road-agents took up the cry:

"We're life even to the death!"

The gloom in this place was perfectly dense, and no idea could be formed of the exact locality of the enemy.

"I will try and reconnoiter a little," said Dick, after consultation with the lieutenant. "The devils may be waitin' fer it to lightning," with an apprehensive glance skyward, "and then they can pelt it to us handsome."

"Hold on," ventured Buffalo Ben, eagerly; "let me do the scoutin'" captain. Don't be afraid to trust me, fer I ain't a-goin' to try to run off till you say so."

"Good!" Deadwood Dick exclaimed, cutting the young man's bonds. "I reckon you're to be trusted, and I've heard that your skill as a scout is wonderful; so go ahead, and bring us back all the news you can."

Ben tightened his belt, and after looking to the condition of his revolvers, which the road-agents had permitted him to retain, he stepped cautiously away into the impenetrable gloom.

"We orter hev that feller among us," declared one of the agents, admiringly, after the scout had disappeared.

"I would not put his neck in the judge's noose by influencing him to join us," replied Dick.

"True!" agreed Cambre. "The brand of a road-agent should never rest upon his shoulders, as it does upon ours. What kicked up the row to-night, captain, and stirred up the Regulator hornets' nest?"

"He who has once before caused me trouble—the deserter and traitor, Fred Audley," replied Dick, "I was passing through the street with my mask off, and a beard upon my face in place of it, when he recognized me, and pointed me out to Old Roxly the Regulator."

"Before I could draw a revolver and fire upon him he had escaped in the crowd. I saw there was an unhealthy outlook for a feller of my description about then, so I lit out."

"You met the cusses again after we divided and started for here?" asked Cambre.

"Yes, or rather, ran through 'em, and got several lead pills into my carcass," with a low laugh. "But I don't mind 'em much, though they weakened on me at first."

In the mean time Buffalo Ben was creeping out of the mouth of the dark, narrow ravine, where his

companions were waiting, into the wider and more inviting gulch, wherein nestled Deadwood's magic city, and from whence had come the discharge of fire-arms.

The darkness seemed to be increasing—at least the sky was growing momentarily blacker, and threatened a fierce storm, ere long. Already faint blushes of lightning were beginning to play across the angry heavens, and a dull roar of thunder became audible.

"Let her pour as much as she pleases, but dispense with the fireworks," muttered the young scout, crawling along, inch by inch, with utmost caution.

"Somehow, I wouldn't like to see Deadwood Dick and his fellers git laid out, though they ain't much to me, to be sure; still, the Prince as they call him, appears to be a pretty fair sort o' chap."

On he wriggled, making less noise than a mouse; never off of his guard, his eyes scrutinizing each suspicious object until he was satisfied as to its nature.

A half—yes, three-quarters of an hour passed, and Deadwood Dick and his men waited anxiously for the return of the scout. What could be the cause of his delay?

"To me it seems about time the chap were giving an account of himself," said Cambre, impatiently. "I could have scouted half around Deadwood in this time."

"You express my thoughts, too," replied Dick, pacing back and forward. "He ought to be back by this time."

"And is back!" exclaimed a voice, and a dark figure loomed into view through the gloom. "But ther ain't time fer palaver, if you want to escape; so come along, an' don't make no more noise'n cat!" And without further explanation he was gone, leaving for guide only the sound of his footsteps. But this clew was sufficient for Deadwood Dick to follow and he and his companions crept away through the darkness, laboring under the delusion they were following the lead of Buffalo Ben. But, they were soon to be apprised of their mistake.

Just as they debouched from the ravine into the gulch, there was a terrible jarring roar of heaven's artillery followed by three successive flashes of lightning, that illuminated the black night with vivid glare.

Then came the deadly ring of a score of rifles—wild shouts of victory from a swarm of men who poured out from cover of the scattered pines—dying groans from dying road-agents—it was a terrible moment, and one in which life was expiring with every weapon's ring—for a few of the Night-Hawks, with Deadwood Dick at their head, had stood the fire, and their flashing revolvers were speaking death to the enemy, each and every moment.

But their number was only five and the Regulators counted full three-score; they made a triumphant rush, and swallowed up the little band—captured them, and bound them hand and foot.

Then throughout Deadwood spread like wildfire the news of the capture of the dare-devil road-agents, and even though the storm poured down its deluge of water, and the thunder boomed along the heavens and the lightning's glare was constant, the streets were thronged with an excited populace, eager to learn the truth of the matter, and get a glimpse of the prisoners.

But in this they were doomed to disappointment, for Deadwood Dick and his pals had been hurried away to confinement in a strong cabin on the southern outskirts of the town.

Here the crowd assembled, and standing in the drenching rain outside the grim structure, inside of which the road-agents had been locked, they discussed the startling events.

Old Roxly, who had succeeded Denby as chief of the Regulators, had stationed a guard every yard around the cabin, and warned them that if the prisoners were not there at sunrise their own necks must satisfy the hangman's noose.

Then, with the rest of his posse, he had spurred

back to the Metropolitan, which was their headquarters, and full a gallon of "tarant'ler-juice" was used to wash down the thirst occasioned by their great victory.

In the mean time let us visit Deadwood Dick in his strange prison.

The interior of the cabin was all in one apartment, and unfurnished. It had been one of the first structures erected in the gulch, but for some strange reason, which we shall not attempt to explain, it had never been tenanted. Therefore Old Roxly had fitted it up as a cage for his captured birds, and the Prince of the Road and the remnant of his band were the first to occupy it.

They were thrust rudely inside, bound hand and foot, after which the Regulators departed, locking the door after them, and leaving the little band to their meditations.

Fortunately they were not gagged, and this left them a freedom of speech they hastened to improve.

"Well," Deadwood Dick said, after the Regulators had gone, "I reckon we few that's left may consider ourselves lucky. I expected we'd git our necks stretched, sure pop, when I found that the cusses were too many for us. How many is there left of us, mates; for I have not taken time to count up?"

"There's six of us," replied Cambre, who had been among those to stand up under the terrible fire. "Jean Douglass, Rock Luger, Dan Forbray, Kit Custer, and you and me."

"And there were a dozen of us before!" the young chief muttered, bitterly. "But, thank the Lord, our band ain't all gone yet. There's enough left at the stronghold to thrash the life out of these Regulator dogs—and they'll avenge us, too, bet your pile on that."

"May my curses rest upon that Buffalo Ben!" cried Cambre, fiercely. "It is to him that we owe this summary defeat, for had we remained in the ravine—"

"They could have picked us off, one by one, with the lightning's aid, and made a more complete victory than they have now!" finished Dick, decisively. "Traitor though this Buffalo Ben is, he couldn't have worked it any better for us; for while, if we had remained in the ravine we should have all been shot down in coming out, six of us are alive, and stand a show of escape."

"A devilish poor show!" growled Kit Custer. "I opine we'll be called upon to try on Lynch's brand o' halter-collars afore another sunset, and that 'll be the eend of our career."

"Never give up the ship while there's any hope which there always is as long as there is life," said Dick, cheerfully. "I would not take an offer of a thousand dollars for my carcass, now, for all death is grinnin' at us, and apparently comin' nearer 'n' nearer. My motto is your motto, mates—'we're life even to the death.' Is it not so?"

"Ay! ay!" assented the other five. "We're life even to the death."

"Which, allow me to remark, very appropriately expresses my sentiments!" exclaimed a voice, coming from a rear end of the cabin.

"Hello!" Deadwood Dick cried, startled beyond expression; "who are you, away back there in the dark?"

"I reckon the letters of my cognomen, properly placed, would spell Buffalo Benjamin!" was the cool response, as a dark object came rolling across the rough, dusty floor.

"Guess you didn't speculate that ye'd find me in hayr, did ye, judgin' from your conversation?"

"Well, no!" the young chief admitted. "I supposed you were feasting with the Regulators, over your success in betraying us to our enemies."

"Hold on, thar, pard!" the scout cried, rather sharply; "I ain't no traitor, and I don't want to be called one. Ef the durned galoots hadn't captured me, I should have come back to you with my report. As it is, I'm elected to swing along wi' the rest o'

you, all because they think I'm a road-agent, which I ain't, nor don't care to be."

"Ha! then you say you did not come and lead us down into the very face of the Regulators' fire?"

"I swear it, if necessary. By feelin' o' my uniform, you'll see it's buckskin, instead of my buffler garb. The galoots give my suit to one o' their crowd, an' as a consequence he cum and fetched you right down into the limericks!"

Deadwood Dick saw, with his keen power of perception, that the fearless young scout was telling the truth.

"I must beg you to forgive my unjust suspicions of you!" he said, earnestly.

Outside the storm roared and tore with unusual fierceness; the rain poured down in a deluge, and made a rushing river down through Deadwood, putting to rout all pedestrians that were abroad; tearing out dams and sluice-boxes, and even carrying away tents and now and then a shanty that stood in the way of the furious torrent. The thunder boomed and crashed as it had seldom been heard to do before, and the terrible vivid glares of lightning came and went, incessantly.

Only the guards paced their beats, and faced the weird music of the warring elements.

Silence prevailed in the cabin prison. No one seemed in a talkative mood; and, too, the roar of the storm nearly drowned the sound of their voices.

The confined road-agents dropped off, one by one, into a sound sleep. Buffalo Ben was not long behind them, though he tried to keep awake.

It was approaching day-dawn when they awoke—awoke to make a startling discovery.

While wrapt in repose somebody or something had severed their bonds, and they were free, to use their limbs.

But their astonishment was further increased when, on "counting noses,"—to use a Western expression—they made the discovery that, by some strange and unaccountable means, *one of their number had effected his escape!*

And that one was—*Deadwood Dick!*

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF BONDAGE—MUZZLE TO MUZZLE.

YES, gone was Deadwood Dick, and no mistake, for he was not in the cabin, and a shout of joy escaped the road-agents as they became assured of the fact.

"Thank God our captain has escaped, even though we are still in durance!" said Cambre, earnestly; "he will now strike a blow for our liberty, and we shall again be free!"

"Hurrah!" cried the others, in unison—"Deadwood Dick, forever!"

"I'm puzzled to know how he escaped," observed Buffalo Ben, examining the walls of the cabin. "Hyer's only one window, an' that's guarded with bars of iron. The door is locked from the outside, an' that leaves no other avenue of escape, as I can see."

"Unless it is up through there," pointing to the fire-place and its accompanying huge chimney. "He could get up through there if he had outside help, which he probably did."

"Right. That explains his escape."

"Couldn't we make a break in that direction?" asked one of the men. "Durned ef I ain't gittin' tired o' stayin' penned up in hayr."

"It is too near daylight to try to escape, I reckon," replied young Jerome.

"I've got a better plan," said Lieutenant Cambre, thoughtfully. "Doubtless we shall soon have a visit from the Regulators. We must be on the watch, an' when they open the door to come in we must rush out, and trust to our feet to take us out o' danger."

"You can do it if you like—not I!" Ben declared decidedly. "Perhaps it may be your best chance,

but as for me, I am not a road-agent, and if I remain it will be that much proof in my favor. See?"

"I'm afeared Old Roxly won't look at it in that light, pard. He's a stubborn old jack-mule, an' don't listen to reason worth a cent. He'll calculate ye're one of us who hadn't pluck enough to attempt to escape, and consequently Judge Lynch will officiate at your funeral 'twixt now and sunset."

"Well, mebbe so, an' mebbe not," Ben answered, carelessly. "Reckon I'll stand my chances, anyhow. A feller can't demise only onc't; I hain't very purtickler as ter ther time."

The storm slacked up as day began to dawn; a breeze laden with the perfume of mountain flowers wafted in through the barred aperture called a window.

Nothing could be heard of the sentinels outside. Probably they were either asleep or had deserted their post during the night's wild tempest. The latter was the most probable theory, considering the escape of Deadwood Dick.

"We'll soon have company," remarked Buffalo Ben, pacing to and fro—"all Deadwood will be down to pay us a morning visit. There! listen—some one is approaching now."

Footsteps were indeed heard drawing near, and it was evident that quite a multitude was coming. As they came closer to the cabin there was considerable commotion—an angry hum of voices—shouts and oaths; then the key was heard to turn quickly in the lock and the door swung open.

But, no sooner was an opening made, than the road-agents, with Cambre at their head, made a precipitate rush out of doors, knocking down the Regulators and springing nimbly over them.

Then away they dashed up the gulch and into the dense forest that flanked the mountain side, followed by a harmless volley of bullets from the weapons of those of the Regulators who had not been prostrated. Instant pursuit was given, every man joining in, thus leaving the cabin unguarded, for it was supposed that all the prisoners had effected their escape.

But there was one who had not joined in the stampede, and that one was Buffalo Ben. He came to the door after the Regulators were some distance off, and chuckled to himself as he stepped forth into the air of freedom, and sauntered leisurely toward the busy town.

"'Bout as lucky an escape as a feller could ask for," was his comment, as he walked along. "Don't reckon I'll be troubled on this score again, unless I war recognized last night. Hope them cusses escaped, for they seemed right jolly sort o' dogs."

As he entered the town Ben stopped at a sluice where a couple of miners were washing sand industriously—early birds they were, who came to the hills to make money.

"'Mornin', pardner," saluted one, looking up from his pan. "Terrible storm we hed. Lookin' fer a job?"

"Oh, no," Ben shook his head with a grimace. "No diggin' fer me. D'ye make it pay?"

"Purty fair—yes. Starm tuck away a gude bit o' payin' top layer; sum left still, tho'."

At this juncture two persons, evidently out for morning exercise, galloped along on a couple of handsome bays—a man with Burnsides, and attired in army uniform, and a young maiden in elegant riding-habit, very pretty of face and form.

Evidently Ben recognized them both, for he raised his cap to the maiden; the man he scarcely deigned a glance. Perhaps the sight was conducive to anger in the officer, for he wheeled his horse down toward the sluice, and jerked him back upon his haunches.

"You young jackanapes!" he cried, furiously, raising his riding-whip as though to strike, "how dare you have the impudence to insult this young lady in my company by saluting her? I'll learn you better manners!"

And the whip came down with a vicious swish across the scout's shoulders. Of course it was but

a mere toy, and the blow was scarcely felt; yet it caused a flame of anger to go rioting over Buffalo Ben's face. He stepped back a pace, his eyes gleaming dangerously.

"You cowardly dog!" he cried, "you shall pay for this, mark my word. I am slightly acquainted with Miss Stella, your companion, and I deem it no dishonor to her if I bow as she passes. You, sir, have insulted me by striking me, and you are a coward."

At this the two miners, who had stopped their work, laughed loudly, and the officer, who was no other than Major Fawdon, grew red in the face.

"I'm a coward, eh?" he cried, hotly; "you cursed imp, I'll show you how much of a coward I am. Before these men, I challenge you to fight, if you dare, and give me a chance to obtain satisfaction and wipe out my grudge against you."

"Which I agree to wi' the hugest kind of delight!" Ben replied, coolly. "Meet me here an hour hence, if you please. The weapons will be revolvers—my choice."

Just then the major saw that he had lost by being too fast. He should have given the scout enough provocation to insure a challenge from him; he, the major, would then have had the choice of weapons, which would have been the sword, with which he could have hacked his enemy into bits. But with the revolver he was nowhere.

The die was cast, however; to retreat was ignominy, disgrace; to go ahead was death, without doubt, for young Jerome had a notoriety second to none as a revolver shot.

"Very well!" he was forced to say, though he could not feel that it was to end very well for him. "I will be on hand."

Then he wheeled and rode away to join the young woman, who was waiting, some distance off.

"Do you know that insolent puppy?" he demanded, with a frown, as they galloped along together.

"I do," the girl replied, apparently not in the least disconcerted by his passion—"have known him a week. Why?"

"Then I want you to cease knowing him, and that at once. He is no one for you to notice or associate with."

"Indeed! but I am the best judge of that. He is at least a gentleman."

"God pity the rest of us, if he is a specimen of what you call a gentleman. Come, let's return to the hotel; I have some business to attend to."

"What business?" she asked, watching him.

"Some business, I said!" he retorted sharply.

"That is sufficient."

"No, it is not. You are going to fight."

"What of it?"

"You will get killed, or *he* will. Don't, George," clutching his arm, as they rode side by side.

"Bah!" shaking off her hand, "you need have no fear. I can easily wing him."

"But that would be terrible, all the same. Please don't fight, George!"

"But I must, sis—Stella, I mean. They'd call me a flunky, if I were to back out, and I the challenger. No, I must fight; but don't fear; I'll come out all right."

They reached the hotel and dismounted. The major ran up to his room, Stella remained on the veranda.

"They will fight and one or the other will get killed," she murmured, thoughtfully. "I hope it will not be Mr. Jerome—or George, either for that matter."

A little later she saw Buffalo Ben come up the street and enter an ammunition store across the way. He had gone to purchase weapons, the Regulators having taken his at the time of his capture.

When he came out, she ran over and waylaid him.

"Oh! Mr. Jerome, you ar'n't going to fight?" she said, pleadingly. "Don't for my sake."

"It's purty hard ter tackle a fellow in that way, Miss Stella. There's few things I wouldn't do for

your sweet sake, but I can't give in this time. It's live or die, for me or Fawdon—die for him, I reckon, for he is no pistol-shot.

"Then you won't do me this favor?" the girl said, poutingly.

"No; I'll have to refuse you this time Stella. He struck me, and I called him a coward, and he challenged me. So were bound to fight."

"Why did you call him that?"

"Hard to tell, dear. When a feller gets riled he ain't most always the master o' his tongue—at least I ain't."

"Well, if you must fight you must, I suppose. But why need you kill him?—just wound him for instance."

"Might do that, it's true. But, mebbe he might blunder and plug it to me;—I wouldn't want to go down without salivatin' him!"

"Oh! he'll not hit you, never fear. He fired six times at a buzzard, once, and then missed it. You won't kill him, then?"

"No, not if you don't wish me to."

"All right; see that you keep your word. Now, good-by," and away she flitted back to the hotel, followed by Ben's admiring gaze.

"That gal's a trump!" he muttered, as he strolled on. "Pretty, intelligent, refined and good-hearted; not much like her rascally brother, durn him!"

Major Fawdon came out of the hotel, just as Stella ran up the steps, her cheeks aglow and eyes sparkling.

"You've been out in the street talking with that young ruffian, and publicly disgracing me!" he cried, savagely.

"He's no more of a ruffian than you are, sir!" flashed Stella, with spirit. "You might be glad if you were one tithe as good as he, even!"

"Humph!" the major's sneer expressed his opinion of the scout, better than words.

"He's a young ruffian, and a blackleg. I've warned you to keep away from him; you'll mind, hereafter, or I'll lock you in your room. Where did you meet him, girl?"

"None of your business, sir. If you came here to scold, you may talk to some one else than to me!" And with the imperious carriage of a queen the girl moved into the hotel, leaving the major to himself.

With a muttered oath, he sauntered down to the claim where he had given Buffalo Ben the challenge.

Quite a crowd had collected here, for the news of the coming duel had spread rapidly. Some were discussing this, and others the escape of Deadwood Dick and his men. It seems that when Old Roxly and his men had come down to the old cabin, they had found the guards lying upon the ground, bound and gagged. Surmises were made that some of Deadwood Dick's uncaptured band had done this work, and then had been frightened off before they could effect the escape of those inside.

Prominent among those gathered at the duel-ground, was that uncouth and eccentric individual from Potato Gulch, who called himself Old Rattlesnake.

In his element was he, now, and he capered about like a frisky dog, overjoyed at the return of its master.

"Hayr cums the red-nosed galoot what says he can lick Buffalo Ben-jam-in!" the miner cried, directing general attention to the major, as he approached. "Oh! Eliza, my blushing primrose, whar art thou, now? Luck at thet ossifer, will ye, pilgrims; obsarve what a dangerous-lookin' galoot he be! Luck at thet ar' pistle—oh! 'Lizy! hain't thet a pompous pistle, now? An' he's ther coon w'at they say kin salivate my boyee—my bashful cherub, Ben-jam-in."

"Is Buffalo Ben here, yet?" the major demanded, sweeping the group with his piercing gaze.

"Nix-cum-a-rous!" volunteered the Rattler, with a grimace; "ther boyee hain't hayr, pilgrim, but he'll be hayr in time ter make mince-pies out o' sech

an ornery-lookin' specimen o' a bull-whacker as be you—bet yer four-buttoned kids on that."

The crowd laughed heartily at the miner's speech, and plainly distinguishable from their voices came another laugh—a wild, blood-curdling shriek of laughter, that made the surrounding rocks echo and re-echo.

"By Heavens!" cried Old Roxly, the Regulator, who chanced to be present, "thet was Deadwood Dick's laugh, boys, sure's I'm a livin' man!"

"Hang me ter a mulberry-tree ef it wasn't!" assented another; and it was generally agreed that the laugh came from the lips of Deadwood Dick. But no one had taken any notice from whence it came.

Buffalo Ben was now seen approaching, and a cheer went up, for on short acquaintance he had already become a prime favorite among the miners who had seen him around Deadwood.

He came up in a swinging, easy gait, and ran his eyes over the crowd until he singled out the major.

"Well!" was his salutation, "you're on hand, I see! Hour's up, ain't it?"

"Yes," Fawdon replied, glancing at his gold watch. "Are you ready?"

"Rather reckon I am, all except choosing a second."

"Hyer's yer Thomas K. Cat!" declared the man from Potato Gulch—"I'm yer man, pilgrim, durn my old sow's last litter of pigs, ef I ain't!"

"You'll do as well as any, perhaps," Ben agreed, "all you've to do is ter see fair play done."

The major chose a gambler by the name of Reese; then the ground was paced off—twenty yards being the measure.

Then the two took their places, facing each other; the seconds, and a counter, who was no less a personage than old Jack Ferguson, formed in line to one side, with drawn weapons. The crowd also assumed side positions, and most of them had drawn their weapons to enforce fair play.

At the word:

"One!"

The weapons of the duelists were cocked and leveled. Both were handsome revolvers.

"Two!" cried Ferguson grimly.

"Oh! Eliza, my primrose!" whispered the Rattler shrilly—"now's yer time!"

And then there was a breathless silence, awaiting the fatal *Three!*

CHAPTER VIII.

TORTURING A GIRL.

"Oh! mercy, don't, please don't! Oh! help! help! for the love of God!"

In a wild, piercing scream of despair rung out these words, emanating from one of a hundred log-cabins that dotted the steep hillside above Deadwood. Then came a sound of a descending lash, and more piteous screams followed, in a purely feminine voice.

A young man climbing up the hillside, without any apparent object, except to get a view of the surrounding country, heard the screams, and stopped.

"A woman in difficulty!" he muttered, scanning the different abodes above and around him. "Hang me if I know whether I'd better interfere, or not. Don't like to hear a feller-mortal screech fer help, without givin' 'em a lift; but who knows but what I might git my fingers burnt fer my pains?"

He listened again and heard the sound of heavy blows, and repetition of the pitiful screams—screams of some woman in most excruciating agony.

"Durned ef I can stand any more of thet music," the listener said, moving rapidly toward a cabin from which he was positive came the sounds. "I'll make it hot work for somebody, or my name ain't Wrestling Walt!"

Straight up to the door Drayton went, and gave a knock that made it tremble.

No screams now came from the inside, but he could hear low, moaning groans, which he knew came from the victim of the punishment. There were, however, sounds of voices in stealthy conversation; then the demand was given in a coarse, gruff tone, yet undeniably a woman's voice:

"Who's thar?"

"You just hurry up and open the door, an' you'll find out," returned the wrestler, authoritatively. "Don't be a month o' Sundays about it, neither."

"Who be ye, an' what d'ye want?" was again asked, after more inaudible conversation on the inside.

"You'll see when you open up."

To his surprise, the bars were shot back, and a moment later, Silver Sal stood upon the threshold.

She uttered an oath as she saw the wrestler; she had seen him once before, by chance, at the Metropolitan. She would have retreated only Drayton's revolver covered her heart.

"Hold easy, ma'am!" the wrestler said, coolly. "I've got a little business ter transact wi' you, so don't be in a hurry. Who were you pounding, you bloated she-wretch?"

Silver Sal gave vent to a forced laugh.

"Oh! I see!" she said, understandingly; "you have made a mistake. Them screeches come from next door, whar old Yansley's bin lickin' his wife."

Just then groans were heard inside the room.

"There! what d'ye say to *that*?" the wrestler demanded, triumphantly. "Tell me that cum from Yansley's, will ye?"

"No, I won't lie!" the woman answered, devoutly. "I despise a liar above all else. Mr. St. Elmo, will you come here, a minnit?"

In answer, the worthy in question made his appearance at the door, beside the coarse figure of the Boss Gal. He would doubtless have drawn a pistol, only that Wrestling Walt warned him to desist, with a shake of his head.

"Let your shootin'-iron alone, Saint!" he said, coolly, "or I'll ventilate you in the latest approved style. Don't imagine I can't do it, fer my revolver is gazin' at both of you!"

"Curse you!" St. Elmo hissed, biting at his black mustache fiercely.

"Curse me as much as you please," Walt replied, with a grin of delight; "fer that's all ye're able ter do at present. I know that you and this greasy wretch ar' inter sum kind o' villainy, an' I'm goin' ter know what. Ef you've been lickin' sum poor girl thet's in yer power, I'm a duck ef I don't hev you strung up ter ther nearest tree."

"I don't see what you're goin' to do!" St. Elmo retorted, sneeringly. "It will require your steady attention to watch us."

"Oh! never you fear but what I'll make both ends meet," Walt replied, perching himself upon a stump close at hand, without wavering his aim. "I most generally go through with what I undertake."

"Some one 'll come along presently whom I can get to give me a lift. Ha! didn't I tell you? Here comes a fellow now."

A man clad in full hunter's costume was descending from toward the top of the mountain, and at a signal from Wrestling Walt he approached.

It was the same iron-framed borderer who had called upon J. Aaron Wadsworth, and given his name as Luke Ransom—or Lightning Luke.

"Well, well! young feller, you seem ter hold a full hand!" he exclaimed, with a broad grin, as he approached.

"Think so! well, now, I don't count two tricks a very full hand. Couldn't hold enny more at present, very conveniently, though."

"No, I shed say not. Wat's the row?"

"Oh! these worthies have been floggin' somebody inside there. I called 'em out, an' convinced 'em that it was best for 'em to stand here under m'

guardianship till sum one come along to investigate."

"I'll see about it," Ransom said, striding toward the cabin.

"Hold on!" Walt ordered, authoritatively; "not so fast, thar, if you please!"

"How?" the borderer asked, looking back.

"Don't be so much in a hurry," Drayton advised. "Just bind these two wolves in men and wimmen's garb, an' then we'll both take a look."

Accordingly Lightning Luke produced some stout cord from his game-bag, and securely bound the wrists of St. Elmo and Silver Sal together.

"Thar, now," he said, with a laugh, "ye can take a promynade down ter ther gulch ef yer like, an' exhibit yerselves fer ther Siamese twins."

"Sure enough; git a-goin'!" agreed Walt, and with the toe of his boot he gave St. Elmo a start-off, and away went the strangely-assorted pair, howling back their threats. Sal was for staying near to the cabin, and keeping a watch over it, but her unamiable companion pulled her along down the hill, bent on finding some one kind enough to release him from his bonds.

Wrestling Walt and Ransom now turned their attention to the cabin, after watching the prisoners go down the hill.

On entering, they beheld a sight that caused them to involuntarily cry out in horror—to hide their eyes to keep out the terrible sight.

Lying upon the floor, weltering in little pools of blood—blood that had gushed from cruel wounds upon her body, was a young girl, of seventeen, or thereabouts, in a state nearly akin to nudeness, for her dress was torn down to her waist. On her back were bloody welts and gashes that had been made by an ugly rawhide whip, which lay upon the floor. blood was smeared upon a face that was very pretty in feature; the hair was long and golden, and very heavy.

She was lying in a state of semi-insensibility; she did not seem to know of the presence of the two men, yet she groaned in a low, pitiful manner.

"This is awful!" exclaimed Wrestling Walt, shuddering. "It's lucky for the poor thing's persecutors that I knew nothing of the enormity of their crime, for I'd have shot them down without hesitation."

"And served 'em right," agreed Ransom. "But come; let's git the gal out of this difficulty; ugh! I hate to tech her, fer fear it will hurt her."

"What shall we do wi' her?" the wrestler asked, perplexedly. "Hanged if I'm much of a nurse fer wimmenkind."

"Leave me ter 'tend ter that part," responded Ransom. "I'm sum'at of a nurse meself. We'll just kerry the gal up ter a cave about a mile above here; that's whar I hold out, and she'll be safe."

"Very well," assented Walt. He was glad enough to have the borderman take the responsibility from his shoulders. "Let's get to work before that old she-cat and St. Elmo come back upon us."

They tenderly raised the maiden from the floor, and while Drayton held her up in an upright position, Luke Ransom washed and dressed her wounds with care and skill. Her torn dress was then re-adjusted, and she was made more comfortable.

Between them the two men carried her out of the cabin, and up the mountain-side, far above where civilization had encroached with its canvas and wooden abodes. Here was a large fissure or opening in the crags, which led into a cave of moderate dimensions.

A fire was burning, which gave the surroundings something of a cheerful appearance. A few blankets, a rude bench or table, and a couple of campstools comprised the furniture.

"There!" exclaimed Ransom, as the girl was laid upon the blankets. "Now, we'll fetch her to, an see what there is about this matter. Danged ef she ain't right perty, now, fer one o' her size."

"I agree with you," the wrestler replied, admiringly. "Somewhere I've seen a face that reminds me of this, and hair, too, alike, but I cannot now tell where."

The blood was washed from the face, thereby enhancing its rare beauty, and the hair combed out; then Ransom poured a small quantity of liquor between the pale lips from a flask that he carried.

The effect was satisfactory, for in a few moments the poor thing gave a gasp, and opened her eyes, staring about her in evident affright.

"Don't be skeered, miss!" Luke said, gently. "Ye're in safe hands now, an' ye needn't be afeard o' our w'ippin' you; eh, pard?"

"No; we're your friends!" replied Walt, earnestly. "How do you feel?"

"Sore, oh, so very lame and sore," moaned the girl. "My back seems perfectly raw, and my head aches terribly."

"No wonder; them brutes nigh 'bout killed you, hanged ef they didn't. War the woman yer mother?"

"Ugh! no; I have no mother nor father—only a brother, of my same age, and God only knows where he is now. I have not seen him for a year. The woman stole me from him and the fur-trader's home where we lived, and brought me to this place. She tried to make me dance in a whisky-hell, but I wouldn't, and she beat me without mercy; but, thank God, I was strong enough to hold my own, until to-day, when she got a bad man to hold me, while she flogged me with a cruel whip!"

A cry of horror escaped honest Luke Ransom, while Walt Drayton uttered an oath under his breath.

He had never deemed St. Elmo such a base villain as this.

Together they had visited various towns through the West, and wrestled before large audiences; never on very intimate or friendly terms, yet Drayton had not cared so much about it, for he perceived that St. Elmo was of a grim, taciturn nature. But he had never counted him so great a villain.

"I'll 'tend to this matter, lady," he said. "If the woman an' her companion don't suffer twice what you have suffered, why, I'm out of my mind."

"Thank you, sir; both of you are very kind, and I shall always feel grateful toward you. Heaven alone knows what had been my fate had not you come and pounded at the door, for I was fast yielding to the torture."

"And do you feel any better now?"

"Yes, my back does not pain me so much, though it is very sore."

"It will soon be well, if you keep quiet," said Drayton. "Here you are safe, and need fear nothing. But you have not told us your name?"

"I had forgotten, sir, it is Belle Jerome."

"Jerome? I've heard such a name, somewhere. What was your brother's handle?"

"Ben, sir—Buffalo Ben, he was more generally called, because he wore a buffalo-skin suit."

"Buffalo Ben? Is it possible? Why, there is a fellow here in Deadwood who answers to that name and suit; and, come, to think, he has golden hair like yours!"

"Oh! that is my dear brother!" cried the girl, brightening up wonderfully. "Are you sure he is here?"

"Positive, for I saw him, not two hours ago, come out of a powder store, down in the gulch."

"Then, please go and find him, at once, and bring him here, will you?"

"Prudence would advise that I wait 'til night before venturing out, for fear your enemies might be watching, and bring overpowering numbers to recapture you. Then, you shall see him."

So they waited for darkness; but before it came, there came something else that effectually prevented the wrestler from leaving the little cabin on his mission—something frightful, unexpected.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DUEL—IN PERIL.

"THREE!" shouted Ferguson—"fire!"

Then there were two sharp, ringing reports, and a jet of flame leaped from each revolver-muzzle—the sing of two leaden death-messengers was distinctly heard by the spectators.

"My gold nuggit ag'in' seventy million dollars, thet ther boyee ain't hurt!" roared the man from Potato Gulch. "Whoop 'em, Eliza Jane! who wants ter bet—seventy million ag'in' my nuggit?"

All were electrified at the result of the duel. Buffalo Ben stood with folded arms, uninjured, undaunted.

Major Fawdon's left wrist was shattered, and bleeding freely; and the major was cursing loudly.

"Bind up my hand!" he cried fiercely; "I'm going to kill that young thief, next time!"

"Oh! Eliza Jane!" howled Rattlesnake; "will ye stand that, Buffler Ben-jam-in? Wull ye allow thet red-nosed Govynernment galoot ter call ye a cleptomannyack? Oh! boyee! boyee! ye'll never rise to ther Presidential cheer, ef ye allow a feller ter sling 'thief' in yer face at this early stage. Don't hurt so much arfter ye're once elected ther fayther o' yer country; but, now, oh! Eliza, my purple-tinted primrose, I blush fer thee, I do, from the very sole o' my stogy boots!"

"Bind up my hand, I say, somebody!" again cried the major, in a rage. "The next time I'll—"

"Git salted worse 'n what you did this time!" finished Ben, coolly; "so I should advise you to stop before you go too far."

"Oh! you can crow as much as you please, curse you!" Fawdon returned, savagely. "It's your life or mine, now!"

"All right; I'm satisfied if you are. I judge I can fix you out in fine style, with one more shot."

"Hurra! three cheers fer ther Star-jangled Spanner!" roared he from Potato Gulch, executing a creditable highland fling, in the middle of the space allotted to the duelists. "My gold nuggit ag'in' seventy trillion, thet Buffler Ben wins the race wi'out breakin'. He's a thorough-bred stallion, ar' Ben, feller-pilgrims, an' kin jist crawl away frum yonder lazy jack mule, beautiful!"

"See here!" the major yelled, rushing up to the eccentric miner, and for the moment forgetting his injured wrist, "you noisy lout, I want to hear less from you, or you'll be sorry. Call me that over again, and I'll undertake the responsibility of knocking you down!"

"Oh! Eliza!" gasped the other, evidently astonished, "you knock me down, you long-eared mule—you red-nose son of a pot-ras'ler—"

Up came the officer's hand, and a blow was aimed full in Old Rattlesnake's bewhiskered face; but it was dextrously warded off, and the next thing the unlucky major knew he was lying outstretched upon the ground.

"Whoop 'em up! Eliza Jane!" sung the miner, victoriously. "Thet's ther kind uv a Thomas K. Cat I am. Did ye hear me me-e-eow?"

The major was assisted to his feet by a couple who sympathized with him in his troubles. His clothes were dirtied, one foot was wet, having projected into the sluice, and his left eye was swollen shut.

A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd, as they looked at him. One would have said that he was badly whipped, at a first glance; but such was not the case.

"Where is Buffalo Ben?" he demanded, gazing around with his one useful eye.

"Oh! Eliza!" murmured Rattlesnake, with a grimace—"I thort he war about ter ask fer me."

"Buffalo Ben is here!" the youth replied, from precisely the same spot where he had stood when he wounded his antagonist. "If you ain't satisfied yit, why, come ter time at onc't, and I'll feed ye."

"Yes," said old Jack Ferguson, impatiently; "ef ye want any more, major, come ter bizness; time's money, nowadays, you know."

"Sech bein' ther case, hyer's a me-e-owin' Thomas K. Cat as would like to swop off a few hours o' time each day, fer a big allowance of filky lucre!" the man from Potato Gulch announced gravely.

The major got one of the crowd to bind up his wrist. It was excessively painful, but his honor was at stake, and he was determined to wreak vengeance on the cool youth, who stood smilingly looking on—the golden-haired young scout, who was hourly winning golden opinions from the rude, honest mining element.

The wrist bandaged, the major toed the mark, a revolver cocked in his right hand, which trembled perceptibly as it came to bear.

"Now, gentlemen, do fer Heaving's sake make yer pellets count, this time; no more o' yer tender-heartedness, or I'll throw up the sponge!" Ferguson cried, peremptorily. "I'll say one, two, three an' away she goes, an' I want ye to sock et ter each other fer kill. D'ye hear?"

"We do!" replied Ben, slipping a loaded cartridge in the place of the exploded one. "We're ready, now, so go ahead wi' yer Centenyal clam-bake."

"Ar' ye ready, major?"

"Perfectly," was the mechanical response.

"Ar' ye ready, Ben-jam-in?" queried the man from Potato Gulch, anxiously.

"Perfectly," assured Ben with a grin.

"Very well; we'll perseed ter business," Ferguson announced. "One!"

Up came the revolvers to a dead level.

Ben was cool, self-possessed, fearless.

Major Fawdon was pale and nervous; his hand trembled so much that it was with difficulty he could keep anything of an aim upon his adversary's heart.

"Two!"

"Three! and away she goes!" cried Ferguson, rapidly.

Two flames leaped from the steel tubes, and then the major uttered a yell of pain. This time a bullet had shattered his right hand, tearing one finger out of joint. Truly this was wonderful marksmanship; and applause was given without limit.

Ben stooped and picked up a long lock of golden-hair that Fawdon's bullet had clipped from one side of his head, without drawing blood.

"Pretty close shave!" he remarked, with a grim smile; "they say a miss ar' good's a mile, however. What ails the major? Got a stomachful, eh?"

"Have he?" roared the Potato-gulchian. "Reckon so. Whoop 'em up, Eliza, blushin' primrose; *thet's* ther kind ov shootin' I luv ter see. Plugged et ter him jes's hansum as ary mortil man ked do, an not half try!"

The major swore roundly, and shook his injured right fist at Buffalo Ben threateningly.

"Curse you!" he cried, his face livid with hate. "I'll be even with you, yet, or my name ain't George Fawdon. Even though you have disabled me, there ar' men in Deadwood who'll work for money, and whom you won't trifle with. Remember!"

And then the vanquished duelist turned, and left the spot, followed by a taunting laugh from young Jerome, and also, another laugh from some unknown source—the terrible, chilling laugh of Deadwood Dick—wild, mocking, awful!

But no one knew whither it came; yet a suspicion was naturally aroused, that, in deep disguise, the dare-devil road-agent chief was in their midst!

Among a hundred men how could one man be singled out as the distinguished Richard?

Major Fawdon returned to his hotel, and as he ran up the steps Stella came out to meet him.

"Oh! George!" she exclaimed, her eyes dilating, "you have been hurt."

"Ruined for life!" he swore, holding up his hands, savagely. "Curse that boy; I'll have his life for this."

"I told you you'd get the worst of it!" was her

offered consolation. "If I had not exacted a promise from him, he would have killed you."

After the duel, Buffalo Ben sauntered off toward the heart of the town, while the crowd dispersed in several directions.

Everywhere were little knots of miners and citizens, excitedly discussing the news that had spread like wildfire through the place, concerning the escape of Deadwood Dick and his men.

As he proceeded the young scout saw a Regulator approaching, wearing *his* suit of buffalo-skin, in which he had always taken so much pride. But he said nothing, for he did not care to have the Regulators remember that it was he whom they had captured as a road-agent spy.

In passing the hotel where Fawdon stopped, he saw Stella motioning to him from an upper window, and waited till she joined him on the steps.

"You nearly killed George," was her reproachful salutation.

"Oh! no; a dozen such wounds would not kill him," Ben assured, with a smile. "Pretty mad, isn't he?"

"Mad? that's no name for it. You have crippled him, and he'll spend every cent he is worth but what he'll see you put under the turf. Beware of assassins hereafter."

"Yes, I'll keep an eye open in the back of my head. Reckon they'll hev to git up in the mornin' to circumvent me, tho'!"

"You are too confident. Some time you will get struck, when off your guard."

"Which I never am," was the reply.

"Here—do you want this?"

He held up the long golden curl which Fawdon's bullet had clipped from his head—a soft silken ringlet that any man might be proud to wear, and sorry to lose.

Stella seized it with a delighted little cry, and kissed it fondly—then blushed in confusion at her boldness.

"Where did you—how—when—" she began.

"It was shot from the side of my head," he said, smiling, "by your amiable brother."

"My brother!" she exclaimed, evidently astonished. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that your brother, Major Fawdon, shot the lock away during our duel."

"Ha! ha! a good joke. Major Fawdon *my* brother? I supposed you knew better than that, Mr. Jerome."

"Then you deny that he is your brother?"

"Certainly. He is my guardian."

"And your name is—"

"Stella Wadsworth!"

"Wadsworth!" Buffalo Ben stared at her curiously. "Humph! I'll bet a coon-skin you're tryin' ter shet my eye up. Either you ain't Wadsworth, or else the major ain't Fawdon; fer it's plain enough that you two are brother and sister."

"Some persons always make mistakes!" the girl retorted, with a toss of her head.

Just then the report of a pistol-shot rung out, and a bullet whizzed by, unpleasantly near to Jerome's head. Involuntarily he raised his eyes toward the upper windows of the hotel, and beheld the sullen face of Major Fawdon withdraw from view.

"Who fired that shot?" Stella demanded, glancing about in alarm.

"Major Fawdon was amusing himself at a little target practice," Ben coolly replied, nodding upward. "Judge I'd best get out of range before he succeeds in hitting me. See you again, sometime, eh?"

"Yes, of course. I will keep this lock of your hair next to my heart," with an earnest look. "Good-day."

"Good-day," and then Ben went on up the street. Toward night he came upon the shanty of "Masked Maude," the fortune-teller.

The door was open, and the mysterious proprietress was standing upon the threshold breathing the perfume-laden breeze that swept down from the mountains.

She started as she saw the young revolver-shot, then came forward and extended one faultless white hand, saying in a voice of peculiar sweetness, which Ben thought he had heard somewhere once before:

"Good-evening, sir. Nice outside."

"Yes, delightful," Ben replied, wondering what was to come next.

"Been into the Metropolitan?"

"No; what's going on there?"

"Couldn't say. Do you play cards?"

"Sometimes, for amusement."

"And money, too, I dare say?"

"Rarely. Never had much luck."

"Come inside, and have a game."

"No, I thank you. Don't hev no appetite fer cards just at present."

"Bah!" with a merry laugh; "you're suspicious—afraid of *me*, a woman!"

"That's a lie!" Ben replied, bluntly. "Hang me if I ever saw that female I war 'fraid of yet. Don't care for cards, though."

"Well, let them go, then; but come in and have a social chat."

"Ain't in no mood fer social chats!" was the rejoinder. Ben didn't half-like this fortune-teller's soft, persuasive tones.

"Can't help it; you *must* come in!" was what came next.

"Must I? Like ter see the critter that can make me do it," and out came a revolver, full cocking with an ominous click. "Now go in, lemons."

Masked Maude uttered a low laugh and retreated into the shanty, closing the door after her. Then Buffalo Ben went on up the gulch, wondering more than ever over the mysteries of Deadwood.

As the shadows of night fell over the golden metropolis, the crowds in the streets became denser, and, consequently, business livelier. Work was over for the day, and play had just begun. Grim, dirty miners came trudging in from the claims; pick-pockets and dark-browed desperadoes stood on the watch for victims to insnare.

Inside the Metropolitan Saloon was the usual crowd of adventurers and representatives of Deadwood's population—a mass of humanity, the faces of which would have been a study for Nast or any other facial artist.

Among the audience was Buffalo Ben, sauntering idly around, endeavoring to pass away an evening by watching the sports of others. And soon he was destined to take a hand himself.

One of the crowd, and no less a man than ex-Lieutenant Fred Audley, of Deadwood Dick's band, walked straight up to the young scout, and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Here, Roxly!" he cried to the Regulator chief, who stood a few yards off, "this young galoot can tell ye where Deadwood Dick is. Nab him, and make him tell what he knows."

"Leave go your hold," said Ben coolly. "I reckon you don't mean me, stranger; I know nuthin' o' Deadwood Dick!"

"Ho! ho!" the traitor road-agent laughed mockingly; "ye can't lie to me, my boy. I saw you talkin' wi' the prince up in ther gulch this afternoon."

"In that case I shall hold ye!" said the captain of Regulators, advancing.

"Hallo!" cried the Regulator who had taken possession of Ben's buffalo-costume; "thet's the spy we caught who got off wi' the road-agents. See! he's got on my togs, and I'm one buffler-skin suit better off."

"Right!" Roxly assented. "We've caught our bird this time. Give up your weapons, young feller!"

"In this fashion!" Ben cried, drawing and cocking a revolver in each hand. "Now, come along, you galoots as want ter take me!"

And as if in answer to his challenge, a pistol report rung through the room, and Fred Audley dropped in his tracks—*dead!*

CHAPTER X.

DEFENSE ONE OF NATURE'S OWN LAWS.

"DEADWOOD DICK!" came from the crowd in one involuntary gasp, and then they glared around, as if in fear of beholding his dread figure standing before them. But if Richard was in the room, he was so cleverly disguised as to defy recognition.

Buffalo Ben had been almost in the act of laying for the ex-lieutenant, but this friendly bullet had spared him the work; he therefore turned to Roxly, who with his Regulators was standing near, dumfounded, for the time being.

"Thar, pilgrims!" said Ben, coolly, "ye see what that feller got fer his supper. He war a traitor to Deadwood Dick's gang, and got well paid for his treachery."

"I b'lieve my soul you shot him yerself; an' I shouldn't much wonder ef you be of Deadwood Dick's gang!" Roxly cried.

"Get out!" Ben laughed heartily at the idea. "I'm no road-agent cuss; you can bet yer ducats on that!"

"I say you are, an' I'm goin' ter arrest an' lynch you wi'out delay. Boys, seize the little cuss!"

"Hold!" Buffalo Ben cried, his voice ringing out clearly through the room—"hold! you dastardly hounds, and hear me out. I am not a road-agent; I swear it. Last night I was captured by Deadwood Dick's men, just before you gave them chase. I was forced to accompany them into the ravine; I volunteered to reconnoiter, and you captured me. When the road-agent made a rush from the cabin, I did not go with them."

"An' we're going to hang you higher than Haman!" cried Old Roxly. "Road-agent or no road-agent, ye war workin' fer the interests o' Deadwood Dick, so ye're bound to wear a hemp collar. Boys—"

"Hold!" Buffalo Ben again cried, his eyes gleaming. "I have explained ali. Keep off, if you value life, for rather than submit to Judge Lynch, I'll wade through blood so sure as my name is Ben Jerome. Now, then, gentlemen, do as you think best!"

There was a momentary pause; an intense silence reigned; the great crowd that swarmed around stood on their guard waiting the issue.

"Seize him!" cried Roxly; then in a body a dozen of his Regulators rushed upon the young scout.

Crack! bang! went his revolvers, the ring of one shot being succeeded by another—the bullets reaching their mark with deadly accuracy. Down went one after another of the Regulators, and still the young Prince of the Pistol stood his ground, his lips set firm, his eyes flashing. But this could not last.

The crowd sided with the Regulators, and at an appeal from Roxly, they swarmed around the boy, and took him a prisoner. He was bound hand and foot and gagged. Then they bore him back to that lonely old cabin-prison, where he had once before spent the night.

Into this cabin he was rudely tumbled, and the key turned upon him, while Old Roxly and several of his men kept watch on the outside, bound to avert an escape this time.

Let us return to the cave, where we left Wrestling Walt and his companions, Lightning Luke and Belie Jerome.

The shadows of eve were just beginning to grow thick down in the gulch, when an explosion occurred—a terrible shock that made the very mountain tremble.

It was all over in a moment, and then our friends beheld, to their horror, what damage had been done. Huge rocks choked up the entrance to the cavern, shutting out light, and shutting in the three.

"By heaven!" Wrestling Walt cried, as he gazed at his two companions—"we're done for now, sure. What! do you think—"

"Thet it war the work o' them as we tuk the gal from. They war powerful mad, when we jovered 'em off down the hill, an' swore bloody vengeance. So I giv' 'em the credit o' this job. And I'm afraid."

he added, "we can never remove these rocks, in ther Lord's world, except by powder, and thet 'd hardly fetch 'em—at least, thar ain't enough in our crowd to budge 'em an inch."

"I don't know about that. I've got a hundred and fifty cartridges, or over; and besides, here's half a pound of giant powder I found on the street, to-day. Altogether, we might squeeze out a pound o' the stuff."

"Well, we can try; but thar's no use o' bein' in a hurry. No doubt our enemies 'll keep an eye hyerbouts, fer a day or so; an' ef our plan should succeed, they'd stand ready to salivate us when we cum out."

A couple of torches were ignited and thrust into niches in the wall, and their blaze lighted the cavern in every part. The fire, too, was replenished, and preparations made for a long sojourn in the rocky mountain prison.

Luckily, Ransom had just that morning killed a deer, which promised to furnish food for some days to come.

After a venison supper, all felt in more cheerful spirits, Belle, especially, brightening up wonderfully. She was vivacious, intelligent, good-hearted, and fairly educated, and made a very pleasant companion.

After awhile all dropped asleep, and so remained until day-dawn, the morning light finding its way in through the few cracks in the entrance.

That day passed slowly enough, and when night once again settled down over the mountain, the two men proceeded to work, resolved to effect an escape from their drear prison, at all hazards.

Each carried a revolver. These were fully loaded, when the remainder of their cartridges were opened—two hundred, in all—and their contents mixed with the half a pound of giant powder that Walt had found, thereby making quite a charge.

A hole in the main rock that blocked the passage afforded a place for the charge, and it was rammed home with a will, for, should this fail, Walt knew that they were doomed.

A fuse connected with the powder, and after all was in readiness, and Belle had been stationed at the rear of the cavern out of reach of harm, Ransom plucked a burning brand from the fire, and lit the fuse!

A few seconds would tell whether they were to be free, or forever, until death came, live in this prison of rocks.

No doubt Buffalo Ben would have been lynched immediately, had the matter been left to the Regulators, for he had slain or wounded several of them in that fight in the bar-room.

But the Government had lately planted a firm foot upon Deadwood soil, and enforced certain laws, making it necessary for even the Regulators to give a prisoner a hearing before the summary justice of hanging to the nearest tree.

Toward midnight the vicinity of the prison was deserted, and, despite their bravest efforts, a feeling of apprehension attacked the guards; even Old Roxly was not proof against it.

"What the de'il is ther matter wi' me?" he growled gruffly. "Sumhow I feel as skeery as an old colt in fly-time."

"Here comes somebody, an' that's a blessed thing," sung out a Regulator. "Ef a mule even 'd cum 'long, 'twould seem a relief."

Footsteps, truly, were heard approaching swiftly, though in the blackness of the night no glimpse could be obtained of the comer. It was evidently a woman, for the steps were light, quick, elastic.

The Regulators of one accord cocked their revolvers.

"Who comes thar?" hailed Roxly, gruffly. "Who be ye, an' what d'ye want?"

"I'm a woman, so fear not!" replied a clear, sweet voice, and then a slight figure, enveloped in a man's

army cloak stepped in among the road-agent hunters.

"Hello! a gal, by thunder!" the chief ejaculated in apparent astonishment. "Whatever fetched ye 'way out here all alone by yerself, sweetie?"

"None of your insolence, sir," the girl replied, drawing herself up, haughtily. "Use no endearing epithets to me. I am Major Fawdon's ward, sir, and I come to beg of you to release Buffalo Ben, who of all men is innocent of association with the road-agents."

"Sorry, miss, but we can't obleege ye—orful pity, too, fer I'm a widower, myself, an' nary purtier gal did ever I see in thes 'ere country."

"There you are again!" Stella cried, angrily. "Please answer my questions, and avoid your expressions of admiration. Why won't you release Buffalo Ben?"

"Easy enuff ans'ered, ma'am. He's a cuss as war caught in aidin' Deadwood Dick, an' thet made him a road-agent in our eyes, no matter ef he be ther biggest preacher in the world. So we're goin' ter hang him up ter dry in the mornin'."

"Oh! no! no! you must not!" cried the young woman, beginning to cry. "You must not!"

"But we shall!" Roxly declared, grimly, "an' all the snivelin' an' cat-waulin' ye can crowd inter twenty-four hours o' time won't change our mind on't. Why, gal, he salivated half o' my crew up ter the Metropolitan, right straight along, an' laid some on 'em out fer a jerny along Salt river."

"Yes, I heard so," was the faint reply, "and more's the pity he didn't finish *you* at the same time!"

This with intense bitterness of tone. Then she turned back toward Deadwood, and the Regulators were left to themselves.

"I was thinkin'!" observed the chief, after they were once more alone—"why not take the young cuss out an' hev ther satisfaction o' swingin' him all to ourselves? After he's dead no one 'll trouble us about *how* he went off."

"Good!" chimed in all of the men, eagerly. "Let's string him up, now."

It was evident they were anxious to have the job done with.

"Well, so be it, then," assented Roxly, a murderous light in his eyes. "Get a rope some o' you. Hyer's a tree right handy. Fetch out the rascal."

The cabin door was burst open, and Buffalo Ben was dragged out into the night. In under the tree that was to be his gallows, he was made to stand erect while the noose was adjusted about his neck.

CHAPTER XI.

A COMPACT—BETRAYED—PERIL.

UNLIKE most men, J. Aaron Wadsworth cared little for name or high position; he never participated or took interest in politics, and had few friends and little influence among his fellow-men, except what he chose to purchase with his wealth.

Not a relative had he in the wide world, near enough of kin to fall heir to his possessions, should he succeed in effectually removing these children of the woman whose very memory he hated.

"And I will remove them," this human fiend resolved, "and also this girl whom Fawdon is trying to palm off on to me. I'll have her put aside, first, and then hunt up the others. Bill Burk is the man to do the job, and I think I can now trust the fellow."

And the millionaire left the hotel in search of Burk—Lucifer in search of Satan.

He first visited the Tabernacle, and scanned the sea of faces here, but the giant ruffian was not there. The "Metropolitan" was next entered with like result.

"These shebangs are almost too high-toned for Bill," he muttered. "Something of a still lower order would better suit his tastes. Hello! here's the

'Stop Bucket.' That savors more of finding him," and into this, the vilest den in Deadwood went the searcher.

Sure enough he found Burk, sitting at a beer-table in a drunken sleep and looking as if he had been through any amount of bar-room trouble. No doubt he had been making free use of the money he had lately received for his murderous job sixteen years ago.

"Hey! wake up!" Wadsworth exclaimed, shaking him by the shoulder, roughly, "What are you doing here?"

"What's the matter wi' you?" growled the ruffian, glaring about savagely, his bloodshot eyes half swollen shut, and his face flushed and bloated. "What d'ye want?"

"How much money have you left?" demanded Wadsworth, feeling his way carefully.

"Nary a copper!" Burk grunted, rather sorrowfully. "Reckon I bought tarant'ler fer the most part o' et."

"Do you want more?"

"On course I do! Goin' ter fork over a couple of thousan'?" and out reached the ruffian's hands, eager to clutch the money.

"No you don't," Wadsworth said, with provoking coolness. "If you want more money you've got to work for it; do you hear? Not another farthing will I ever give you till you do a certain job for me, and do it thoroughly, too."

Burk stared in a drunken way; shut up one eye so that he would not behold two J. Aaron Wadsworths standing before him, instead of one.

"Some more dirty work ye want ter git onto my hands, eh?" he questioned, sleepily.

"More bloody work!" the millionaire corrected, with a heartless laugh.

Then he ordered a bottle of brandy, and a couple of glasses.

"Help yourself, William, while we talk business," he said, seating himself opposite the ruffian. "Nothing like a little dampness added to a transaction."

And Bill Burk was not slow to help himself, pouring out a brimming glass of the raw poison, and gulping it down in a draught. Then he stared at Wadsworth, waiting for him to proceed.

The millionaire was drumming on the table in a thoughtful manner, his brows knitted together in a dark scowl.

"It's another woman I want put out of the way," he said at last, addressing his bleary-eyed auditor, "an' I want you to do the job."

"Waal, I'm agreeable, pervidin' thar's any money in it."

"Of course, I'll pay you, but you must first get rid of the girl. I'll give you a thousand dollars to put her six feet under ground. Fair, ain't it?"

"Git out! Two thousan' 'd hardly be a decent offer," the ruffian growled. "'Sides, ye'll hev to cum down wi' yer rhino afore I'll lift a finger!"

"Then I'll give the job to some other tough," Wadsworth declared, decidedly, while he made a feint to rise. "There's plenty of desperate cusses who will jump at the chance."

"Just hold yer horses!" Burk said, eagerly. "I'll take the job at a thousan', an' ye can pay me arter the gal's a corpuess. Whar've I got ter steer ter find her?"

"Not out of Deadwood. She is here, stopping at the same hotel I do. Her name is Stella. You see, Major Fawdon has set her up as one of my wife's children—an heir to my estates; so I want to remove her."

"Major Fawdon?"

"Yes; do you know anything of the fellow?" and the inquirer grew excited.

"Not much. Met him up in Helena four years ago, when his company war stationed there. Used ter take a smile wi' him him occasionally; that's all."

"And enough, too. It accounts for his knowl-

ledge of this heirship business; he then laid his plans."

"The gal is—"

"His sister, no doubt. But I want her decently buried, however. After you've done with the job, call on me for your pay. Mind, though, I am in no way to be mentioned in connection with the affair."

"O' course not, Mister Wadsworth. Sail ahead, an' be a-countin' out yer rhino, fer I shall be along soon."

Then the monster took his departure, congratulating himself on his success thus far.

That night, while Stella was returning from her midnight visit to the cabin prison of Buffalo Ben, she suddenly found herself confronted by the burly form of a man in a gloomy portion of the gulch road. She could see nothing of his face for the intense darkness, but in stature he was a very giant.

"Slow up, ma'am!" was the rough salutation, and Stella trembled with fear and apprehension. "Bein't ye Stella Fawdon, eh? w'at Buffler Ben be shinin' up to?"

"Why do you ask, sir? What right have you to stop a woman in this manner? Let me pass."

"Oh! no, ye don't do noffin' o' the kind! I axed ye a fair question, didn't I? an' now ye've got ter give me a fair ans'er—durn my head, ef ye hain't!"

"Yes, I am Stella; so let me go—I'm in a hurry."

"Ye aire, aire ye? Waal, now, I ain't; so just be aisy ef ye can. I ain't goin' ter hurt a ha'r o' yer purty pate; but after ye ans'er me a few questions, I'm goin' ter take ye straight to Buffler Ben, who wants to see ye."

"What! do you come from him?"

"Reckon I don't come frum no one else, ef I know myself."

"But Ben is imprisoned in a cabin, back here, and guarded by Regulators."

"He *war*, you mean to say. But he ain't now, though ther Regulators don't know nothin' about his escape."

"Then he has really escaped?"

"Bet yer life, an' I'm ther percise individual as helped him out o' his little deeficulty."

"Oh! then I thank you so much!" Stella cried, joyfully. "I was afraid it was all up with him."

"Yas, et looked purty squally. War you just down ter ther cabin?"

"Yes."

"An' did yer see ther Regulators?"

"Yes."

"Purty gallus set o' coons, hey? Durn 'em, they nigh about put a punctuation p'int inter me, w'en I helped Ben out o' ther chimbley. Want ter go an' see the boyee, ma'am?"

"Yes, if you will take me to him," Stella replied eagerly, and without a shadow of suspicion. "Where is he?"

"Not fur, miss; you just foller me, an' we'll soon come ter whar he's hidin'."

"Then he is a fugitive?"

"Reckon so; 'll hev ter fight mighty shy, after salivatin' them Regs."

So saying, the giant led the way into a dark, deep ravine that branched off from the main gulch. The path was rough and tortuous, and it was with some misgiving that the girl followed.

Fully two miles were traveled in silence—it seemed ten instead of two to Stella—when the guide paused and faced abruptly about, a cocked revolver in his hand.

"Thar, miss!" he said, with a brutal laugh, "we've gone fur enough. Buffalo Ben ain't here—probably never was."

"What!" Stella gasped in horror. "You—"

"Hev fooled you nicely!" finished Bill Burk, with a hoarse laugh. "I fetched you out hyer out o' sight an' hearin', an' am a-goin' ter blow yer brains

out, an' put ye six feet under groun'. How do that fit yer ijees, my pretty?"

There were a few seconds of breathless suspense to those in the little mountain cave, as the fuse slowly burned nearer and nearer to the powder; then came a blinding flash, a tremendous report and shock, and out of the mouth of the passage shot the great boulder, and down the declivitous mountain-side.

All ran to the entrance through the growing darkness and watched the great mass of stone in its mad flight. Down! down! down it bounded in giant leaps, pausing at nothing, but crushing all in its path.

Right below, in its course, stood a miner's frame shanty.

"By Heaven! it's good-by to that caboose!" Walt cried, and in the next breath the stone monster struck the obstacle with irresistible fury, literally overwhelming it. Fortunately, the miner was absent.

The cave was a prison no longer, and the three arranged at once to leave the place for one of greater safety, but first resolved to hunt up Buffalo Ben, in deference to the girl's eager wishes.

So Luke prepared a repast in short order out of the juicy flesh of the deer. Then Drayton made ready to descend the mountain into Deadwood, whose twinkling lights were visible far below.

"Keep shady, and let no one in here, 'less they give my signal, which shall be"—and here the wrestler lowered his voice—"two hoots of an owl."

"All right," replied Ransom, "go 'long wi' yer apple-cart, an' come back as soon as you can."

Drayton then took his departure, and Luke and Belle were left alone in the cave.

After a little while Luke proposed that Belle should lie down for the night, while he remained awake, for it was not policy to leave the cave unguarded. She did so, and, after covering up the fire, Luke took a seat near it, and relapsed into a deep reverie.

But he was soon aroused by the sharp report of a pistol, and a bullet whizzed unpleasantly near to his head. Enemies were upon them!

CHAPTER XII.

ROAD-AGENTS TO THE RESCUE.

"Young feller, hev yer sed yer prayers?" Old Roxly asked, as he adjusted the noose about the neck of Buffalo Ben, "fer ef you hain't I advise you to be sayin' 'em, instanter, fer we're a-goin' ter trot ye before yer Master, ater rattlin' pace. Ye hev five minnits, yit; improve 'em best ye kin."

Jerome had never been brought up religiously; from early childhood his lot had been cast among a rough, unbelieving set, who paid but little heed to either the laws of God or man. Still, he had picked up some education—learned that there was an All-wise Ruler, to whom the sinful and wicked must at last look for salvation; he had, from his sister Belle, learned a simple little prayer, and this he now silently offered to heaven—not for the power to escape, but that God might have mercy on his erring, sinful soul.

Then he looked up, a fearless expression upon his face. He could not speak for the gag that was fastened in his mouth, but the flash of his eyes spoke his defiance.

"Waal, aire ye ready?" demanded the chief, eager to proceed with the execution.

"Git reddy, b'yees!" the Regulator cried, and the other end of the rope was swung over a limb, and seized by a dozen hands. It drew tight about Ben's neck, and he realized that he was about to be sent into eternity.

"All right. Go ahead—one! two! three! heave Ol!" cried Roxly; then there was a corresponding

cry from the Regulators, and the young scout was the next instant dangling in mid-air. But, it was only for an instant.

Out upon the still night air rung the sharp ping of a number of rifles; the rope was severed and Ben dropped to the earth again; while at the same time three of the would-be executioners fell dead in their tracks.

Then came wild shouts as a score of horsemen, headed by the terrible Black Rider, whose very name was a terror in the town of Deadwood, came dashing up with drawn revolvers.

Crack! crack! went these deadliest of small weapons, the firing coming from both road-agents and Regulators.

"At them, Night-Hawks!" rung out the order of Deadwood Dick, as he fired right and left—"at them, and don't let a mother's son escape. Treachery merits death, an' we'll give it to 'em!"

And fiercely waged the battle; but, though the opposing party fought like devils, they rapidly weakened, and at last Old Roxly gave the order to scatter.

And scatter they did, and took back into Deadwood a tale of horror—a shock that aroused the populace to a pitch of frenzy, nearly bordering on madness.

Buffalo Ben, upon falling to the ground, found that the thongs about his ankles had broken, and his lower extremities were free. For a moment he did not know how to act, but when the road-agents dashed up he leaped away into the darkness, and struck out blindly.

Ben had no idea where to strike for in the dense blackness of the night.

He well knew it would be unsafe to show himself in Deadwood right away, after shooting the Regulators, as well as having the brand of a road-agent upon his head. No, he must hide somewhere in the surrounding hills, and allow the matter to blow over.

With this determination he started off, cautiously, now and then pausing to listen to the sounds of the battle of the road-agents and the Regulators.

"Humph! Deadwood Dick don't bear them fellows no love!" he muttered. "He's got a grudge against 'em, an' he's bound to wipe it all out, sooner or later."

Ben worked his way carefully along through the gulch, going from instead of toward Deadwood. He kept on the alert, and yet despite this caution he ran plump up against a horse, which was standing like an immovable statue in his path—a large, powerful gray animal, upon whose back was mounted a woman, young and beautiful, as was evident at a glance.

It was also apparent the strange rider had halted in this lonely spot to listen to the firing that came from the neighborhood of the old cabin.

Ben leaped back with a grunt, inaudible on account of the gag still in his mouth.

The young horsewoman held a gleaming revolver in her right hand, and its muzzle pointed toward his heart.

"Who are you?" she demanded, suspiciously.

Of course he could not reply. All he could do was step closer, in hopes that his interlocuter would discover his predicament.

"Come!" she said, sternly, "ain't you going to answer me?"

Then, as she leaned forward, she saw that he was gagged, and his hands bound securely behind his back.

"Ha! you can't speak, eh?" she exclaimed. "I thought you were trying me."

She drew a long, glittering knife from the silken sash that encircled her waist, and applied its keen edge to the gag-string.

It fell to the ground, and Ben was free to speak once more.

"Thank you!" he said, gratefully. "You may also free my arms, if you please."

"But I don't please, just yet," was the cool reply.

"Your tongue cannot do me any personal injury—with your hands it might be different."

"Oh! you need not fear. I am not a bloodthirsty savage!" and Ben laughed. "I'd be a miserable cuss, indeed, to attack a friend, and that friend a woman."

"Maybe I ain't your friend, now, so don't count your chickens before they're hatched!" was the calm advice. "What is your handle, stranger?"

"Buffalo Benjamin Jerome!" the scout replied, dryly. "And yours—"

"Is Leone Harris. I am the wife of Deadwood Dick!"

"Phew!" This was astonishing news for Ben. "Deadwood Dick's wife, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I am led to understand that you know him?"

"Oh! yes, slightly," Ben couldn't say if he was proud of the acquaintance, or not. "He has done me several good turns."

"So? I heard him mention your name. Is he in that fight, down there, now?"

"He was, when I sloped; for, you see, the Regulators were going to string me up, when he and his fellers came along. I was unarmed, so I concluded it was best to make myself seldom around there. But, I want you to tell me one thing: how did Dick escape from the cabin, last night?"

"I helped him. With part of the band I captured the Regulators, and bound them. One of the men went down the chimney, into the cabin, then, and cut your bonds. Dick and he came out, then; Dick said let the rest of you remain in there, for he had a plan for your rescue. But as it happened, you all escaped ere he could put his plan into execution!"

The firing had now ceased; it was at this period that the Regulators had made a rush and escaped.

"I'll cut your arms free," said Leone, "and then go and join my husband. He does not know that I followed him."

She suited action to the word, and then Ben was once more entirely free.

"I ain't got et in my power ter thank you, enough!" he said, humbly.

"No thanks are required, sir," the young wife of Deadwood Dick replied. "To a friend it is always friendship, with us; to an enemy, always hatred!"

"I believe ye. Love and hate ar' two passions thet rule strongest among the population of the Black Hills."

Leone bowed, and was about to guide her horse on down the gulch, when she seemed to recollect something.

"Will you see my husband?" she asked.

"Dunno; mebbe, an' mebbe not," Ben replied, remembering that he should have to keep shady. "Why?"

"Because your act at the Metropolitan has made you an outlaw. You will not dare to show yourself. Would you not like to become a road-agent?"

"No, siree!" was the emphatic answer. "That ain't my cast o' jib, at all, ma'am. Ef I'm an outlaw, it's on my own hook, an' I'll look out fer number one."

"Very well, I'll not urge you, though I think you would be benefited. If, however, you should want to see Deadwood Dick, at any time, or need any assistance, apply to the party whose directions you will find on this."

She handed him a card; then put spurs to her horse and dashed down the gulch toward the old cabin, Buffalo Ben following her with his eyes until she was lost in the dense gloom of the night.

"A strange couple—this Deadwood Dick and his wife," he muttered. "What pleasure there can be in this hunted life, is beyond my comprehension."

He glanced at the card, but it was too dark for him to decipher what was written thereon. So he thrust it into an inside pocket of his hunting-shirt and continued on his course down the gulch. He met several miners coming in from some neighboring claim, but took care not to let them see him; for

in the Black Hills after nightfall each man suspects the other of being a cut-throat.

He had not gone far before he became aware that people were in the gulch ahead of him. He could hear their footsteps. Two at least, he decided, as he was able to distinguish the footfalls.

"I wonder who can be out here so late? 'Pears to me it don't look just square. Hallo! they've turned off into this ravine. Durned spookerish sort o' a place, an' thet's what's queer about et. S'posen I war ter foller—what then? 'Twouldn't be ther furst time Ben Jerome's trod a trail."

He quickened his footsteps so that he might get nearer to the midnight pedestrians, but he at the same time doubled his caution.

As the horror of her situation fully dawned upon the mind of Stella Wadsworth, she gave vent to a piercing shriek, that startled the mountain echoes, and then she turned to flee.

But in an instant she was in the iron grasp of her merciless betrayer.

"No ye don't, my pretty bird!" he chuckled, holding her as easily as he would have held a child. "Ye ain't a-goin' ter escape, nor nothin' like et."

"Let me go, you horrible man!" Stella cried, trembling with affright. "Let me return to Deadwood," and she burst into tears and sobs.

"Oh! what have I ever done to you that you should want to injure me?" she moaned. "Only let me go."

"Ye never did ennything ter me, my daisy," the ruffian said, "never even so much as looked cross-eyed at me. Ter thet I'll make affydativ."

"Then why do you threaten me? Why did you bring me here?"

Bill Burk leaned against a tree and reflected a moment. Why could he not keep this peerless girl for himself, and tell Aaron Wadsworth that she was dead? He would never know.

"I'll tell ye," he said, glancing sharply around him. "I've made up my mind not to murder you, as I war hired ter do, but, instead, keep you fer myself. I'll take ye ter an old hut I know on, back hyer in the Hills, an' ye shall become Mrs. Bill Burk, jes' 'es soon as I can run down a gospel-slinger. What say you?"

Stella put up her hands in horror.

"Oh! kill me, then, a thousand times, rather than force me to submit to such a fate!"

"Gently, gal; don't go fer ter rile me, fer I'm a double-j'inted cuss when I'm riled. I ain't a-goin' ter kill ye, nor nothin' of ther sort. I'm jest in need o' a purty wife, and you'll fit like a charm. So cum 'long wi' ye, afore I hurt ye."

And, seizing her roughly by the wrist, the ruffian continued on up the ravine, dragging her after him. But not a great way did he go ere he was compelled to halt, for, scream after scream from the terrified girl's lips awoke the mountain echoes, and he was alarmed lest they might attract attention.

"Curses on ye!" he hissed, in a rage. "I'll stop thet yowlin'!" and his knotted hand struck her a violent blow upon the forehead. As he had intended, it produced insensibility; then catching her up in his arms he hastened on up the gulch, his fears now all aroused. Miners were everywhere in the hills, and already more than one might be on his trail. But Buffalo Ben was the only pursuer. He had heard the screams and rightly judging that there was foul play, he rushed on to investigate, not even using precaution to silence. He saw the giant speeding on with wonderful strides, and yet held him persistently in view.

"Hold up, thar, you devil!" cried the ruffian, at last coming to a halt on the very brink of a yawning abyss—"hold up! or by the Lord Harry, I'll make wolf-food outen ye!"

And a revolver's click! click! sounded plainly, showing that Bill Burk was going to die game.

Of course Buffalo Ben halted; he was weaponless, and what could he do against an armed "tough?"

CHAPTER XIII.

CALAMITY JANE—DEFENSE.

"Now, hold yer hosses stedly!" cried the ruffian, as he became aware that Ben had stopped. "Ef ye cum a step closer, I'll throw this gal over into the abyss in front o' me; for as I fetched her out hyer ter murder her, this ar' the boss place!"

Ben groaned in an agony of spirit, powerless to rescue the captive woman; he must turn back and leave her to the ruffian's mercy.

But, hark!—a pistol-shot rung out on the air. There was a yell of mortal agony, fierce and terrible; then the great ruffian went down to the ground, an ugly bullet-hole in his temple. He carried poor, insensible Stella with him, but she received no injury aside from a slight shock, of which she was unconscious.

Ben rushed forward to the spot. The ruffian lay where death had reached for him. A moment he gazed at the lifeless corse; then he gathered a few dry twigs and ignited them into a blaze, that he might better view his surroundings.

On either side the rugged walls rose to a stupendous height, their summits crowned with spectral pines; ahead yawned a dark, awful abyss, whose bottom was hundreds of feet below; behind ran the gulch-ravine, in a serpentine course, the route over which Ben had come. The night's darkness was, it seemed, doubly intense here in this isolated spot, and the scout shuddered as he gave a glance down into the fathomless depths of the abyss, on whose very brink Bill Burk had fallen in death.

"Ugh! that is a horrible place!" he muttered; and, drawing back, he turned his attention to the ruffian and his captive. A cry of astonishment and horror escaped his lips as he beheld the girl.

"By heaven! it is Stella!" and the next instant the golden-haired scout was kneeling beside her, an expression of alarm upon his face. "Oh! can it be that she is dead? No! thank God, her heart still beats, and she lives! A blow here upon her forehead has rendered her senseless."

Close at hand water dripped from a crevice in the ledge of rocks. Filling his hat Ben dashed it liberally into the girl's face, then he bathed her forehead, and wet her lips with liquor from the girdle-flask of the dead ruffian. The effect was gradual, yet certain, and in a few moments Stella gave a convulsive shiver, and opened her eyes.

For a moment she seemed dazed and bewildered; then she rose to her feet, and Ben supported her in his strong, young arms.

"Thank heaven, I have escaped!" Stella murmured, with a terrified glance at the prostrate ruffian. "Who killed him? What—you here, Mr. Jerome?"

"I was coming out into the hills to escape Deadwood justice, when I overheard your screams, and gave chase," explained Ben. "As to who killed that tough, I am in entire ignorance. The shot, however, cum along just in time, for I believe the cuss intended to throw ye over into that hole."

"But, how came you here? I thought you were imprisoned in the old cabin. I was there, and tried to coax Roxly to release you, but it was no use."

"Deadwood Dick liberated me. The Regulators took me out, and were going to hang me, after you left, when along came Dick, with his road-agents, an' shot me down, an' then bounced the Regulators. Of course I sloped, for I ain't safe to be seen in Deadwood, now. I met Dick's wife on ther way, an' she cut my bonds and gag. How did you come to be in this tough's power?"

"He stopped me when I was returning from the cabin-prison!" exclaimed Stella, shuddering as she gazed at the stiffening corpse. "He told me you had sent him for me—that you were free, and he would conduct me to you. Of course I came, under the circumstances. Back yonder, when I first screamed, he told me he had brought me out here to murder me!"

Ben stared at the ground thoughtfully for a few moments.

"There is some underhand game hyer!" he said, his brows knitting perplexedly. "Who could have such a spite against you as to seek your life?"

"Ah! I cannot tell. I know of not an enemy on earth," was the reply. "Come, let us return to Deadwood."

"No!" Ben shook his head quickly. "I am branded as an outlaw, and it means death to go back now. I shall have to wait a few weeks, till things cool off."

"No need of that!" Stella declared, confidently, and she drew from the pocket of her dress a package done up in brown paper. "Here I have a disguise that I procured for you, which will effectually hide Buffalo Ben from the world." And undoing it, she held up to view a mustache, beard and wig, all of a dark-brown color.

"Just the thing!" was Ben's appreciative comment, and he proceeded to don them, thereby thoroughly disguising himself. "Now, I reckon, I ain't afeard ter go back ter Deadwood an' face ther music."

But after a short consultation it was decided by Ben that they should remain where they were until the following afternoon. This would give a chance for the excitement to partially blow over, and there would be less danger of detection.

Accordingly preparations were made for the short sojourn. After securing the arms of the lifeless Bill Burk, Ben pitched the body over into the abyss, and it went down! down! down! forever out of the sight of man; then he went to work and built a rousing fire, that lit up the camp with a cheery glow, and a genial warmth soon pervaded the chill air.

"I'd ruther camp out, any time, when thar's lots of wood, water, deer-meat, and hostile Ingens on the tow," observed Ben, seating himself near the blaze. "A hunk o' deer's hind leg wouldn't come amiss just about now, considerin' as I hain't partook o' any stummick nourishment lately."

"Well, pilgrim, supposin' we sharpen our teeth on a little, then!" proposed a cheery voice, and looking around, our friends beheld, to their astonishment, a young individual standing close by, he evidently having descended a rope which ran up the face of the ravine wall to a ledge above, and was there fastened to a rocky spur. A dashing-looking person, with smooth face, black, flashing eyes, and long hair, and attired in a faultless suit of buckskin, with dainty moccasins, and a slouch sombrero cocked upon one side of the head.

"Hello!" exclaimed Buffalo Ben, and also ejaculated Stella, for both had seen and heard of the personage who had so unceremoniously descended into their little camp. "*Calamity Jane*, as I live!"

"Reckon 'tis, pilgrim!" and this wonderful girl in man's garb came forward, extending a hand to each of the two campers. "Didn't 'spect to see *me*, did you?" and she gave vent to a strange laugh, really enlivening to hear.

"Waal, no. Last I heerd o' you, they had you at Shian fer pickin' pockets!" was Ben's matter-of-fact response.

"That report was a big lie!" Jane asserted. "I hev'n't bin outside the hills, 'cept over ter Bozeman, in a year. 'Twas another cuss o' a gal that the Cheyenne constables nabbed."

"Did you shoot the man who was carryng me off a while ago?" Stella asked.

"Yes; ruther jedge I knocked sev'ral years out o' his callendar," replied the girl, nodding. "War up above, an' see'd as he meant ter annihilate ye; so I put a fly in his ear."

"And done me a service," said Ben. "I was unarmed, and like's not the devil would 'a' slung her over, but for your timely bullet."

After an hour more of desultory conversation, Jane produced a piece of uncooked venison from an oil-cloth blanket, which was slung to her back, and it was broiled over the glowing coals, furnishing, when done, a palatable repast, to which the trio did full justice.

Then Calamity volunteered to stand guard while

Ben and Stella sought slumber and rest, which arrangement being perfected, the two lay down on separate couches of leaves, and dropped off into sweet repose.

Ben relieved Calamity a short time before day-break, but she was not sleepy, she said, so did not lie down.

They remained in camp through the day, and started, about sunset, for Deadwood, at which place they arrived soon after dusk.

Stella was left at her hotel; then Ben and Calamity sauntered around to the "Tabernacle," and then to the "Met," to see what was going on.

But all was quiet, save such little occurrences as fights or quarrels, the larger class of which rarely attract attention among the crowd.

Calamity sat down at one of the tables, but Ben continued to saunter around.

A commotion at one end of the saloon attracted him, and going thither, he beheld a crowd of roughs gathered threateningly around a single man.

It took but a glance to recognize that eccentric individual from Potato Gulch—"the me-e-owing Thomas K. Cat"—the tonguey and ludicrously-homely Rattlesnake.

But, for a wonder, the old fellow was not so tonguey now. He stood with his back against the table; his face was an enigma to study, with its bushy red beard and variety of expression; its firmly set lips and flashing black orbs; then, too, the gleaming cocked revolver in either hand, ready for instant use, showed that he was at bay—a dangerous man to deal with. The roughs around him also held weapons drawn; their faces, mirrors of their evil hearts, were stern and determined in expression. Plain it was that there was business ahead; yet, neither the roughs nor the miner moved to do battle—it was a war of eyes.

Ben glanced over his shoulder, and saw that Calamity Jane had followed close behind him.

Then Ben pushed ahead, his own—or rather Bill Burk's—revolvers out and cocked, ready for use.

Straight through the crowd he elbowed, Calamity faithfully at his side, and put his back to the table, alongside the besieged miner.

Things didn't look quite so bad for Old Rattlesnake, just then.

The uninvited bullet that buzzed so close to the shaggy head of Lightning Luke, announced that a crisis was at hand.

"Thunder!" mildly ejaculated the hunter; as he kicked aside the expiring fire, and seized Belle, who had been aroused to a sitting posture. He at once dragged her unceremoniously to the rear of the cave, and placed her behind a boulder. The hunter also crouched low behind its shelter, and both he and his fair charge listened.

No sound came from the front; 'way out through the entrance was visible a countless number of twinkling lights, which came from the hill on the opposite side of Deadwood gulch.

"Do you think it was Silver Sal or St. Elmo, who fired the shot?" Belle asked, concernedly.

"O' course 'twar one o' their salutes!" Luke replied, his revolver conveniently leveled over the top of the protecting boulder.

"O' course et war! Durn their ornery pictures, they cum nigh a-sandin' in my statistics, they did! Lucky I warn't asleep, or they'd 'a' lambasted me, sure."

"The bullet nearly hit you, then?"

"Cum wi'in ther width uv an old maid's lip o' it, blarsted ef et didn't! 'Sh—!"

Bang! went the hunter's revolver, and so sudden was the report that Belle jumped in alarm.

"What is the matter? Why did you fire?"

"Because I see'd suthin' ter aim at. Harkee! dy'e hear thet?"

A series of groans emanated from near the mouth of the cavern.

"You have killed some one!"

"Not much;—wouldn't hear that much squeaking ef ther animile's dead."

The groans finally ceased; either the victim was dead or insensible, or had so far recovered as to crawl away.

"Do you see anything?" Belle asked, growing nervous and fidgety, at the hunter's deep silence. "Ah! what was that?"

A noise it was, coming from within the cavern near the entrance—a noise as if some one had disturbed a loosened stone with their foot.

"Some one's got inside, arfter all," said Luke, ranging his gaze around through the gloom. "More's likely it's a dozen 'stead o' one—"

Bang! bang! went his revolver at this instant, for his keen eye had caught a glimpse of a moving shadow, and sight was to fire, with him.

There was a sharp, piercing feminine shriek; then all was still.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CONFLICT.

No, it did not look quite so bad for Old Rattlesnake, when two such wild, venturesome spirits as Buffalo Ben and Calamity Jane sided in with him; and it looked still more as if the roughs might have their hands full, when still another figure pushed through the crowd, and ranged his six-shooter on the defensive—the handsome, stalwart wrestler, Walt Drayton—who, coming into the saloon, and taking in the situation at a glance, had willingly volunteered his services. It was only after he was among the defenders, that the miner gave vent to his views of the affair in words, where hitherto he had remained silent.

"Whoop 'em up, Eliza Jane!" was his initiatory ejaculation, while a grin of admiration for his points of defense, distorted his red-bewhiskered features. "Blushin' est o' primroses, w'ar art thou, now? Oh! cum erlong ye ornery galoots, ef thar's any fun in ye; prance rite up hyer, an' stomp on the east eend o' our durned tails, will ye, and see'f we won't me-e-ow wuss nor any Thomas K. Cats ye ever did see! Oh! cavortin' lambs an' bellerin' bufferoes! why don't ye pitch inter us ef yer want musick, an' lick a hull consterlashun o' stars out o' us? We're ther kind o' meat ye're s'archin' fer, so jist sail in' ther downright han'sumest ye 'now how!"

"Yes—cum along ef ye're in a hurry ter explore the mysteries o' purgatory!" cried Calamity Jane, fearlessly, while the looks of Buffalo Ben and Wrestling Walt were as good as a guarantee that they were prepared, if not eager to take a hand in the impending affray.

But for some cause the roughs held aloof. Either they were waiting for Rattlesnake to strike first, or were fearful of the consequences resulting from an open attack. Certain it was that the opposite party were a powerful quartette in themselves, a fact which did not escape the eyes of the toughs.

In the interval Ben took opportunity to ascertain the cause of the trouble.

"What is the jig, anyhow?" he asked, watching narrowly the sea of scowling faces, just opposite.

"Matter?" grunted the miner, with a tremendous yawn—"why, ye see, I've got a sart'in twenty-ounce nuggit, an' these durned galoots affirm it's my duty ter tell 'em whar I got it, which I don't allow ar' reason'ble; wharfore, I purpose ter say I sha'n't tell 'em, an' they agree ter make a fust-class funeral out o' me ef I don't unload, w'ich I won't, ef I get knocked inter ther middle o' day behind ter-morrer. That's my caliber; so cum right elong, ye durned ornery, lantern-jawed, knock-'need sons o' pot-ras'lers!"

One of the "toughs" now spoke:

"It's no use o' you're givin' us enny o' yer castaway slang, old hoss, fer 'tain't goin' ter do ye ther least bit o' good. In ther name o' ther law an' civil

rights o' ther constytoochin, we demand ter know where ye got thet big nugget frum?"

"An' in ther name o' Angel Gabriel, trumpet an' all, I sw'ar I'll chaw my old dirty shirt fer terbacker afore I'll tell ye!" was the startling announcement of the miner.

"Hurra!" applauded Calamity Jane, and the shout was taken up by a dozen or more sympathizing miners who instantly pushed through to our friend's rescue.

The toughs could no longer repress their desire for combat; besides, they saw that reinforcements were being constantly added to the enemy's line. Hank Hurley, the ruffian leader, saw this, and a fierce oath escaped his lips.

"Aire ye goin' to squeal out w'at we want ter know?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"NO!" yelled the miner with emphasis, "*never!* Ye kin baptize me in Salt River; ye kin scorch off ther soles o' my feet; ye kin call me a squallin' Thomas K. Cat, an' even stomp on my tail, an' heer me me-e-ow; ye kin do all this—an' more—but may I be eat up by Canadabulls, ef I tell whar frum cometh this nugget o' a'riferous!"

"Then you're a dead man!" was the reply, and quickly the outlaw raised his revolver, and fired straight at the miner's breast.

But, not yet on the death-roll was he from the sacred precincts of Potato Gulch. Stagger he could not help, for the ball tore through a fleshy part of his side, making a painful wound; but what cared he for such a trifling scratch? In his years of life he had received many a tough encounter with leaden death; still he lived; and now he leaped forward toward his enemies, calling his backers after him.

"Cum erlong, daisies, an' we'll make these barkin' coyotes hunt their howtel in less time 'n it takes May ter chase December round ther North pole. Hurra! cock-a-doodle-doo-o-o! Sweep ther varmin from ther face o' Terence Firma! Banish 'em as St. Patrick O'Hoolahan banished ther toadstools frum Connettycut! Oh! Eliza Jane, show us yer caliber, *now*, ef ever ye did!"

And "Eliza's caliber" appeared to be somewhat immense, for right and left swung the miner's herculean arms, and his revolvers flashed incessantly, never a bullet missing its mark; while down went the ruffians thick and fast under the destructive fire of those few brave and dauntless spirits who had volunteered their aid.

Yet the ruffians fought like devils, bound to win the victory, and there is no telling but what they might have succeeded had not, when the tide was just about on the turning point, a wild, blood-curdling yell of eldritch laughter rung loudly and echoed and re-echoed through the great saloon—a yell that was known to nearly every ear—the terrible token of the presence of Deadwood Dick!

No one knew whence came the laugh of the young road-agent; there was no time for conjecture, in the din of the raging conflict; yet, certain it was that in deep disguise Deadwood Dick stood within the walls of the Metropolitan, and this very thought added strength and vigor to our little band, and inch by inch they drove back the roughs, continuing the deadly fire, until but half a dozen of the original crowd was left; and with howls of rage, they turned and fled, leaving Old Rattlesnake and the others victors of the bloody ground.

Four of the volunteers had been killed, and all more or less wounded. Buffalo Ben was severely wounded in the legs, which rendered him unfit to walk. He had fallen among the dead and dying, even as the defeated toughs beat an ignominious retreat.

During the conflict he had been lucky enough to keep on his false wig and beard. And that prevented his being recognized by the miners, who crowded around.

Calamity Jane, however, was in the secret of his disguise, and she knew with a woman's instinct that

he must be removed, before discovery of his identity was made.

"Do you know Buffalo Ben?" she said, addressing the Potato-gulchian, in an undertone, careful not to let the words reach other ears. "Do you know him?"

"Do I?" quoth the original "Thomas K. Cat," with a stare. "Reckon so! Gay boyee is thet same Ben-jam-in. Oh! primroses, *guess* I know him; socked eternity inter a passel o' Reg'laters, as han'sum as ever I see'd t'other evenin'."

"For which same job he is required ter amble about in disguise," announced Calamity. "'Sh! don't make a noise. See! thar he lays, now, plugged full o' metal pills—him as wears the beard and mousetach. Come! we must git him out o' here. Where shall we take him?"

"Next door but one!" decided the miner, quickly, and Calamity noticed that a strange change came over his manner of speech. "Here! you wrestler, help me a hand!"

And poor Ben was raised between the two, and carried from the saloon, Jane close behind, supporting his head in her hands.

Straight to the shanty of Masked Maude, the fortune-teller, the wounded youth was carried, and into the front room, the Potato-gulchian seeming perfectly familiar with the surroundings.

The proprietress herself was absent, so Rattlesnake made free to use whatever might add to the comfort of Ben.

He was laid upon the cot bed, and the red-whiskered miner made an inspection of his body in search of wounds. Several were found upon his lower limbs, near the knee, none of which were of any account except for inconvenience. One in the breast, near the region of the heart, however, was more dangerous.

With a skillful hand Rattlesnake dressed the wounds; then leaving Wrestling Walt and Calamity in charge, he went forth in search of the fortune-teller.

"Who is the chap, pard?" Drayton ventured to ask of Calamity, whom he mistook for one of his own sex, on account of her garb. He had not yet learned that the wounded youth was other than one of the rough, grizzled miners, who had so generously volunteered in the conflict.

Calamity was about to reply, when Ben raised himself upon his elbow.

"Take off this false-hair, will you, some one?" he asked, his voice trembling. He was very weak from a great loss of blood, and his head ached terribly.

Calamity quickly relieved him of the wig, beard and mustache, and the handsome, golden-haired scout looked like himself once more, except that his face was very white.

"By Jove! you are Buffalo Ben!" Drayton cried, in astonishment, coming forward to the bedside.

"Yes, I am Buffalo Ben. Why? you do not know me—or, I don't you, 'cept as a wrestler!"

"Your name is not so obscure here in Deadwood," replied Walt, with a smile. "Yes, I know you, by sight. In fact, I was just hunting for you, when the saloon jamboree attracted my attention."

"Hunting for me?" Ben livened up a little at this. "How's that? why were you hunting for me?"

"You have a sister, have you not?"

"A sister!" The young prince of the pistol sat straight upright in bed, unmindful that his wounds bled afresh at each move. "What do *you* know of her?"

"Very little, pard, except that I had the pleasure o' rescuin' her from a female wretch they call Silver Sal. With the aid of a miner, I carried her up to a cave on the mountain, and here I am in search of you, by her orders."

Ben gave a whoop of joy that took away all thoughts of his suffering, and put his hand in that of the wrestler.

"Pard!" he said, huskily, "you have done me the

greatest favor man could do me—have done what I have been endeavoring to do for the last year, namely, rescue my sister from a terrible captivity. I shall never know how to be grateful enough—”

Here the youth ceased speaking; his head swam, a strange fog came before his eyes, and he fell back senseless upon the couch.

He had overdone, and it was full an hour before he regained his senses. Then there was a strange look about his eyes and lips, that one does not like to behold on a sick person.

Calamity observed it first, and called Drayton's attention to it.

“It don't look right,” she said, with a compression of the lips. “I don't like it.”

“Do you think—” began the wrestler, but she motioned for him to be silent.

The young scout lay in a sort of trance; his lips moved, and the two words he uttered were scarcely audible:

“Alice! Bel'e!”

“His sister and sweetheart!” said Calamity, comprehending. “They had best be fetched, fer—”

“For what?”

“For Buffalo Ben is sinking fast toward the grave!” was the reply.

“Do you know where his sweetheart is, and who she is?”

“Yes; her name is Stella. We left her not two hours ago, at the Centennial Hotel, where she stops.”

“Then I will go for her, and then for Miss Jerome,” decided Walt. “As you say, it looks as if the boy's a-goin' fast.”

He borrowed a few cartridges and loaded his revolver; then went out into the night. But a few steps had he gone, when he met a woman, hurrying swiftly along as though in haste.

“You are Masked Maude!” Walt said, positively, stopping her. He saw that her face was masked, indeed, and that her attire was very rich.

“Well!” she cried, sharply, “what of it?”

“A good deal. Did a red-whiskered miner, Old Rattlesnake by name, send you?”

“Yes—why?”

“Go on, then! Buffalo Ben is dying;” and the wrestler hurried on, leaving the fortune-teller staring after him.

On the steps of the Centennial Hotel, Drayton came in contact with J. Aaron Wadsworth.

“Hello!” he ejaculated, stepping back; “excuse me; but is there a young lady stopping here by the name of Stella?—Stella something-or-other; hanged if I know what!” with a laugh.

The man of millions stared.

“No, I think not!” he said. “She went away last evening; Major Fawdon says he has seen nothing of her since.”

Major Fawdon came out as the millionaire was speaking.

“Ah! here is Fawdon, now. Hey! major, suppose you've heard nothing of Stella? A young man is here inquiring after her.”

“Eh?” The major sauntered up, his eyes blood-shot, and breath smelling very strongly of whisky. His hands were also done up in slings, crippled and not for use. “Yes the girl came back, short time ago. Said a rough carried her off, and tried to murder her, but he got shot, and so she got free. What the deuce do you want, young fellow?” this to the wrestler, in a gruff, surly tone.

“I have a message to deliver to the young lady they call Miss Stella!” replied Walt, not at all admiring the major.

“Well, then hand it over to me, and I'll see she gets it.”

But Walt shook his head. It occurred to him that it might not be advisable to betray the whereabouts of Buffalo Ben.

“No; I must see the young lady in person,” was the reply.

“Hey? what?” The officer didn't appear to quite

credit his hearing. “You won't trust the message with me?”

“No; I must give it to the one it's intended for.”

“Then, get along with you; you can't see her. D'ye hear?”

Drayton was about to turn away, when a slight, girlish figure flitted out from the hall, and was at his side.

“What is it? Why do you seek me?” she demanded, breathlessly.

Walt glanced around. The major was striding savagely close; only time was given him to whisper:

“Buffalo Ben is dying. Masked Maude's shanty, beyond Metropolitan Saloon.” Then he hurried off toward the hillside, bound toward the cave.

Stella turned and flew into the hotel, with a very deathly-white face.

Scarcely two minutes elapsed ere she came forth, and sped down the street, wearing a hat and waterproof.

“I'll follow her!” said the major, with an oath, “and learn what's the rumpus!”

CHAPTER XV.

BRINGING MATTERS TO A CLOSE.

WRESTLING WALT strode swiftly through the town, and ascended the steep eastern hillside, which would have been enveloped in Stygian gloom, but for the lights gleaming brightly from many a miner's tent or shanty.

The ascent of the hill was no easy matter. It was rough and rocky, and in places covered with patches of briars.

But Drayton kept on determinedly, and his efforts were at last rewarded by reaching the entrance of the cavern.

All was dark and silent within.

In the passageway was a dead body. Drayton started violently as he stumbled over it.

“By Heaven! what has happened?” he ejaculated, striking a match, and holding it to the prostrate man's face. “As I'm a live sucker, it's St. Elmo!”

It was indeed the professional wrestler, lying just where a bullet from the revolver of Lightning Luke had reached him. He was quite dead, and growing stiff as he lay there.

“By thunder!” Drayton muttered, “this smells suspiciously that there's been trouble here.”

He stood for a moment, undecided whether to enter the black cavern or not. Might not Luke and Belle have been overpowered, and might not the enemy be lying in wait for him, ready to salivate him?

These were the thoughts that flashed across the wrestler's mind, but he was no coward, and a moment later he advanced into the cavern.

“Hello! Luke, are you there?” he called; then he listened for a reply.

There was a glad cry from the darkness, and next came the voice of the big-hearted hunter:

“Hello yerself! Be that you, Wrestler?”

“Reckon's me,” replied Walt. “Come out; what ye doin' back there in the gloom, like a pair of frightened sheep?”

“Bin hevin' a funeral round these diggin's,” replied the hunter, coming forward, Belle accompanying him. “Salivated two prowlers a bit ago; hed a notion to plug you, out yonder, when you lit the match, but thought I'd best wait an' see.”

“Thoughtful of you,” replied Walt, sarcastically. “I see you've put the light of eternity through St. Elmo, out yonder, in approved style.”

“St. Elmo? War et the feller we hitched ter the fat gal, w'at I keeled over?”

“The same. He's deader 'an a door nail.”

“Score one p'int fer Ransom, then,” chuckled the hunter; “also another in ther bargain, fer I opine ye'll find another lifeless corpuss some'eres 'bout in ther dark hyer.”

"Let's have a light and investigate, then. Who kicked the fire out—you?"

"Shouldn't wonder. Too much glim war thare, so I doused it, tharby preventin' ther enemy from shovin' their pepper too free."

By groping around Walt found and succeeded in lighting a resinous pine knot, the flame of which distinctly lit up the cavern from one end to the other.

A little way off from where the trio were standing lay the form of a woman, outstretched upon the floor.

It took but a glance to recognize the former cap-tress of Belle, the ugly and repulsive Silver Sal.

She had run her race, and now lay silent in death.

"'Tis Silver Sal!" exclaimed Belle shuddering, as her mind reverted to the many beatings she had received at the bad creature's hands. "She is dead, and though she was cruel and merciless to me, I ask God to have mercy on her soul."

Then she turned to Drayton.

"My brother, did you find him?" was the question, eagerly put, and her fair hand clasped his arm, hopefully.

"Yes, miss, I found Buffalo Ben," was the wrestler's hesitating reply, "but it was in battle, in which I volunteered to take a part. He fell just when we had scattered the enemy, and is now lying very low at the cabin of Masked Maude, the fortune-teller, a few doors from the Metropolitan saloon. I have come to take you to him."

Belle grew very pale. Many girls would have fainted, but the lovely sister of Buffalo Ben controlled her emotion; and then followed Drayton and Lightning Luke from the cave.

They descended the hillside, to the shanty formerly occupied by Silver Sal; here some wraps were hastily secured for Belle, and then they hurried on.

Walt had communicated his fears to Ransom; consequently, both men were eager to reach the death-bed of the scout, where their services might be needed any moment.

And ere long they were knocking at the door of the fortune teller's abode, and were quietly admitted by Masked Maude, in person.

Belle ran quickly to the bedside of the dying scout, and kneeling by his side, burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

Just opposite her was Stella, stroking back the youth's hair, and sobbing as if her heart would break.

At the foot of the bed stood a grave, clerical-looking gentleman, the army surgeon of the command then stationed in Deadwood.

Calamity occupied a position at the head of the bed, and was silent.

"What change has there been? How is he, poor fellow?" asked Drayton, in a whisper, tears coming into his eyes, as he glanced at the pale, pained face on the pillows, wreathed in its semi-framework of soft golden hair.

"You can see for yourself," replied the masked fortune-teller, in a low tone. "He has lain as he now lies ever since I came. Surely there is every indication that he is dying. Calamity summoned the surgeon; he says the case is bad, but does not pronounce it hopeless."

Both Walt and Ransom went and knelt by the bedside. The wrestler took the youth's hand in his and pressed it gently.

"Who do you want to see, Ben?" he asked, tenderly. "Is there any one you want to come?"

"Only two!" replied Jerome, in a scarcely audible tone—"only two."

"And they are—"

"Belle and Stella!"

"Then take comfort, for both are here. Rise, ladies, that he may see you."

Both the girls rose to their feet, and bent over the one whom of all others they loved the best. Ben seemed to recognize them both, for an expression

of radiant joy lighted up his pale face, and he with an effort held out a hand to each.

"I am so glad!" he gasped; then came a great volume of clotted blood from between his lips, and he sunk back in exhaustion.

As he did so one of the sleeves of his hunting-shirt was pushed above to the shoulder, and on the arm a name was indelibly tattooed.

Luke Ransom was the only one to see this name, but it was a startling discovery to him. The name was *Benjamin Wadsworth*! Here, then, was one of the children of the murdered Elvira Wadsworth—one of the rightful heirs to the immense property of Aaron Wadsworth, the fiend-father!

His first action was to call the surgeon to one side, and hold a short consultation.

"Is thar enny hopes, doctor?"

"Hardly, I think!" was the grave reply. "He is sinking very fast."

"Yas, that's plain; but, doctor, you must raise him—you *must*, I tell ye. What amount o' spondulics will cause you to put yer best fut for'ard in this case?"

The surgeon started, then smiled.

"Well," he said, reflectively, "now that you've asked me a fair question, I'll give you a fair answer. One thousand dollars' worth of properly administered remedies would place the boy in his saddle within a week."

Luke would have knocked the man down at another time; but now he felt that Buffalo Ben must recover at all hazards, no matter the cost.

"Go ahead, then," he said simply. "As soon as he is ready for the saddle, your fee shall be ready for you."

The surgeon accepted with alacrity. A thousand dollars was not to be made every forty-eight hours, and he was positive he could raise this case.

He ordered all away from the bedside; then mixed medicines every few moments, and poured them between Ben's lips, watching their effect narrowly.

In the mean time Luke and Drayton kept watch of the exterior surroundings of the cabin, for they were fearful that Major Fawdon would lead a posse of the Regulators down in search of Buffalo Ben.

But morning dawned, and its rosy sunlight bathed the mountain tops in crimson and gold; yet no enemies had shown themselves.

Leaving Walt and the others at the shanty, Lightning Luke set off up the gulch for a stroll. He had an object in view, however, and it became manifest when he ran accidentally across J. Aaron Wadsworth.

"Hello!" the scheming millionaire exclaimed, at once recognizing the hunter. "You in Deadwood yet? I was in hopes I had seen the last of you."

"Ye don't say so!" Ransom replied, evidently amazed. "Waal, ye hain't seen ther last o' me, that's darned certain. I war jest lookin' ye up. I want ye ter cum along wi' me."

"Where to?"

"No matter whar; jest foller me, that's all. I've got somethin' ter show ye."

Wadsworth hesitated. He was suspicious of this Northwesterner; he did not know what trap might have been laid for him.

"I won't go!" he declared. "You wish to waylay and murder me!"

"Oh, no! I don't wish ter do anything o' the kind. I have found the children of Elvira Wadsworth. Give me your weapons, if you have any, and come along."

"I have none, I am unarmed."

"You lie! You have a revolver there in your hip pocket. Give et ter me quick!"

The millionaire handed it over, with a dark scowl. Somehow he felt himself completely in this nunter's power. And, too, he could not afford to be obstinate, for he was eager to learn if really these so-called children of Elvira Wadsworth were her children.

There was a way to prove their identity that he knew of, that he supposed Ransom to be ignorant of.

"Lead on," he said. "I'm all impatience to see these progeny of mine," with a sarcastic laugh. "I suppose they look like their villainous father, eh?"

"No; like their murdered mother, I should say—light of complexion and hair."

"Yes, that corresponds somewhat with their mother's description. But go ahead, and give us a look at them!"

Ransom led the way back toward the shanty of Masked Maude. There was a steely glitter in his eyes, which, if it had been observed by J. Aaron Wadsworth, might have caused that gentleman a feeling of uneasiness.

The shanty gained, Luke opened the door and entered, Wadsworth close at his heels.

Inside, the hunter turned upon him.

"You will permit me to bind your hands," he said; and he did the job neatly, before the millionaire was scarce aware of it.

Buffalo Ben was sitting bolstered up on the bed, with more color in his cheeks, and a greater portion of life than he had possessed when Luke had gone forth. Belle sat by his side, with his hands in hers, and as they were thus near to each other, you saw the great resemblance between them.

"There, Aaron Wadsworth!" Ransom said, pointing to the twain, "are your children, whom you hired Bill Burk to murder, sixteen years ago, along with their mother—your lawfully wedded wife. Ha! I see you recognize 'em; ye see in them a great resemblance to her whom you hounded down to death!"

The man of millions said nothing; only stood and stared with dilated eyes at the youth and maiden, who, knowing nothing of the matter, were at a loss to comprehend the situation. His face was deathly white, and his form trembled like a shaken reed.

"Ha! ha!" the hunter continued, "see the fiend tremble. He knows an' fears w'at's a-comin'. My friends, et ar' my purpose ter tell ye a short story, an' ter you two, Miss Belle an' Buffaler Ben, et ar' of special interest.

"Sixteen years ago, last winter, my old dad, Zeke Ransom, was over at Yocum, in Montana Territory, when he met a female wi' two little babes in her arms, who appealed ter him fer protection, sayin' as she war pursued by enemies an' knew not w'ich way to turn. So, what should Ole Zeke do but tote them along home wi' him, 'way out in the wilderness, beyond Twenty-Mile Stretch.

"While the woman was there, a day or so, as nigh as I kin judge, she writ this 'ere document," and here the hunter produced the paper on which Elvira Wadsworth had left her confession—"an' my ole dad buried it in a cache o' peltries I had nigh the cabin.

"In the followin' spring I returned from a trap-pin' expedition, an' found my dad's body layin' a few rods only from the cabin, whar he had been shot down, an' in the open doorway o' the same isolate home o' my boyhood, I also found the corpse o' a woman.

"Side by side I buried 'em, and when goin' ter get my pelts out o' ther cache I found this dockymment, which war explanation, in a measure!"

Here he stopped, and all eyes involuntarily turned upon Aaron Wadsworth, for every person present felt that he was connected with the crime, though none knew how closely.

After a little pause, Ransom continued, his eyes fixed alternately upon the millionaire and Buffalo Ben,

"I took the paper, and after long and hard study managed to decipher ets contents, fer et ar', as ye see, written on terbaccy paper, wi' a piece o' plum-bago. What I read there, my friends, fired me with a determination to hunt down the man whose hand war at the bottom o' this foul assassination, an' boy tho' I was, I set out on the trail, to avenge the death o' my only living parent.

"Since then I have roamed about the world, and met with many adventures but feelin' all the time I should some day meet the real murderer of my father—the human devil whose hands were dyed deep in the blood of his own wife.

"And so it has turned out. I have encountered my game, at last, and vengeance shall be mine.

"But first, let me read ter you the dockymment I found in my peltry cache—thet will explain things better'n I can."

Then, after cleaning his throat, Lightning Luke read from the confession.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TELL-TALE DOCUMENT—CONCLUSION.

"To whom it may concern:—

"This is the life history of Elvira Leamington Wadsworth. To begin with, over two years ago, I in secret wedded Aaron Wadsworth, a young millionaire, whose vast estates joined those of my father's. He professed to love me, and I imagined I loved him, in return. But I see now that it was a mad delusion.

"We were secretly married at his proposal, he not wishing to make our nuptials public, for a year, during which time he said he hoped to effect a reconciliation of a deadly feud that existed between my family and his. But for nine months we were secretly together, much of the time; he made me costly presents, and we were happy—at least, I was.

"But, when my twin babes were born it all changed. He seldom came to me, after my father drove me from my home, and I took refuge in a neighboring village, and when he did come, it was only to curse me, and abuse me and my darlings. At last his conduct became so brutal that I grew desperate, and told him that if he did not publicly acknowledge me as his wife, and make me the mistress of his home, I would take the law into my own hands. Then he became worse than ever, and tried to kill me and my babes.

"He hated me, he said, and swore that neither I nor my children should ever inherit or enjoy a farthing of his millions; he became so violent that I was afraid of him. I dared hardly stir out of the doors for fear he would murder me.

"I at last made up my mind to take my children and fly—I knew not, cared not, where, only to escape from his devilish persecutions. But he heard of my resolve, and forbade me to go, threatening to send agents after me, who would murder me and my babes, too.

"This frightened me more than ever, and one night I took them, and fled forever from the home of my youth. I would have gone to my father, but he had forbidden my ever showing my face at his door, after the birth of my children and his discovery that I was the wife of his bitterest living enemy. Thus it was that I was cast adrift upon the cruel, pitiless world.

"I had money—money which I had saved out of what he had first recklessly squandered upon me, and with this I paid my passage to New York, where I endeavored to hide myself in the great city. But not a week had passed before I became aware that I was being hunted down.

"My cruel husband had set upon my track one of the most notorious ruffians of the county we lived in—a desperate, cunning villain, who stopped at nothing to achieve his own ends.

"This man, Bill Burk by name, had rallied around him a gang of kindred spirits, and they were on my trail, nosing me out, with murderous intent; learning which, I left New York for Chicago.

"But, like the bloodhounds they were, they followed me thither, and again necessity compelled me to flee before them, to escape death at their hands. I went to St. Louis, to Denver, to Salt Lake City, and to many small towns in the West, but all to no

purpose. Like sleuth demons they followed in my wake.

"At last I am here, in the home of an old hunter named Ransom, far in an isolated wilderness, but they will surely come. I feel it in my heart. And I can go no further. My funds are nearly exhausted; besides, I have despaired of ever escaping them. I am writing this and shall leave it where it will be found after I am dead. My babes—oh! God, I cannot bear to think of them. My only hope is that they may escape, and inherit the fortune which is rightfully theirs, and which their fiend father would defraud them of.

"I leave this, in hopes that they may escape, and that the finder of this will hunt them up, and avenge my death, which I feel will be but a matter of a few hours. My children are named Benjamin and Mabel Wadsworth. On their arms above the elbow you will find their names indelibly tattooed. I had it done in Aaron's presence, the second week after my darlings' birth. I also leave rolled up with this document a certificate of my marriage, and also one of my babes' birth, which will be all that is required, to establish their rights as heirs of J. Aaron Wadsworth, their fiendish father.

"Should this fall into the hands of Luke Ransom, whose father is now sheltering me beneath his hospitable roof, I pray and beg that said Luke will earnestly endeavor to discover whether or not my babes are dead; and if so, that he will go East and give this matter into the hands of the law: if not, that he will find my children, and see them reared to a proper age, at which time they can push their lawful claims of inheritance.

"And may not only my heirs, but may Almighty God reward him for his services in their behalf.

"And now I feel that my mission is as nearly complete as I can make it.

"Signed, ELVIRA L. WADSWORTH."

Silence reigned throughout the apartment, as Lightning Luke concluded reading; all eyes were centered upon the guilty man of millions, accusingly.

"And this is Aaron Wadsworth, the man whose hands are stained with the life-blood of our mother!" cried Buffalo Ben, his voice rising clear and stern, despite his deathly weakness—"the inhuman husband and father, of whom we have just heard?"

"The same," declared Ransom.

"Yer father, my boyee an' girl, who would even now murder you, were it in his power, w'ich etain't. By his agency died my old father—one o' the best trappers on the frontier; and by his son's hand shall die Zeke Ransom's murderer—for this is the man who is the real murderer.

"But I hev a leetle more to add. I found thet aire docymment, an' learnt w'at I've told ye. Nowhere could I find a de'd babby; so I concluded they war alive. I traced 'em inter an Injun camp, an' seen 'em sold ter an old fur-trader, named Jesse Jerome. I knew him well, an' knew they'd hev a good hum. So I went off, satisfied on thet subject. A short time after, I tried ter find where Jerome lived, but he had vamoosed his ranch, an' penetrated further inter the wilderness; tharfore I war discomflummixed!

"I searched for him, off 'n' on, fer all time sence, an' less'n a year ago found him up nigh ther British line. But ter my bitter disappointment, I learned thet the gal hed turned up missin', sev'ral months before, an' thet ther boyee hed gone in search o' her.

"I hev been looking for them ever since. For ten years back I've hed a watch put on this Aaron Wadsworth, in his home at the East, an' w'en I found he was comin' ter Deadwood. I came also. And I found him; and in Buffalo Ben and his sister I have found the children of the murdered Elvira, which nearly ends my mission.

"Here, Ben, are the certificates and testimony; they insure you a fortune, and, I hope, a pleasant future life. For my services in your behalf I crave say one favor."

"And what is that, Luke?"

"That you turn over ter me this base villain—your father!"

"Ha!" this was something unexpected. "I am surprised. What d'ye want o' him?"

"I want to use him," was the hunter's grim reply. "Is he mine?"

"Yes; take him forever from my sight, lest I kill him myself, and thus avenge my mother's death. Begone now, but come back presently, fer I would see you again!" cried Buffalo Ben.

Lightning Luke bowed, and then turned to Aaron Wadsworth, who, white as a sheet, stood tremblingly by.

"Come!" he said, sternly, "you're mine now. Your life depends on yer obedience."

Then he left the shanty, the millionaire following him like a whipped cur.

The young scout's strength now returned so rapidly, that when the following noon came he was able to leave his couch, supported on the arm of Wrestling Walt, who was as devoted as a brother.

Stella and Belle were fast friends, but, even in their joy, all felt an uneasiness; even Masked Maude was not without apprehension, for they momentarily expected an attack from the Regulators.

And sure enough, about sunset a band of thirty or more headed by Old Roxly, were seen approaching from up the gulch. All were armed with repeating rifles and pistols.

From holes in the shanty wall the inmates watched the approach.

"I'm afraid thar 'll hev ter be more blood spilt than ever!" said Drayton. "Major Fawdon has sent 'em hyer fer Buffalo Ben, but they sha'n't take him while I can pull a trigger."

"Bravo!" cried Masked Maude, with enthusiasm. "But, your attention a moment, my friends, while I make a disclosure that will doubtless astonish you. People call me Masked Maude, the fortune-teller. It is because they know me not. I assumed this disguise, and also, at different times, that of *Old Rattlesnake—the "me-e-owin' Thomas Cat,"* to enable me to be in Deadwood without being recognized; but now, to you few assembled here, I unmask, and you behold me as I am—*Deadwood Dick, the road-agent.*" And, tearing off the mask, and touching a spring in the back of the dress, the Prince of the Road stood disrobed of his feminine garb, but still in his suit of jetty black—handsome, fearless, dare-devil Deadwood Dick, indeed.

A general cry of astonishment greeted this revelation of the young outlaw, and his quiet laugh reassured them.

"This is a surprise, eh? But we have no time to talk it over, now. Business is at hand, and business always comes before pleasure, with me. We must meet these Regulator dogs as they deserve; and punish 'em, too!"

Quickly he ran to the center of the floor, and pulled up a trap-door that opened into a cellar, below, then up into the room, to the further amazement of all, poured two score of masked men, all of them road-agents, without doubt.

"Every man to his loop-hole!" rung out the young chief's order, and as many rifles as there were men, were leveled at the approaching Regulators.

Then Deadwood Dick flung open the door, and stood upon the threshold, fearless of danger or death.

"Regulators of Deadwood!" he cried, and his tones were stern and cold, "you have at last made a blunder that places you in my power. In this shanty my whole force of road-agents are concentrated—forty in all, and by ranging your eyes along the walls, you will perceive that as many rifles are bearing upon you, with deadly aim. One word from me, and you are, for a most part, dead men. Now, wishing no further warfare, I ask you, will you retreat and allow me and mine to quietly take our de

parture from Deadwood, or will you come on, and force us to fight our way out?"

"We will come on, and we'll take ye, or die in the attempt!" yelled Roxly, springing forward, and firing at the breast of the young road-agent.

But it was his last shot.

Loudly rung the rifle-reports of the road-agents, and down went two-thirds of the Regulators, either dead or dying.

The rest turned and fled back to the Metropolitan, whereupon a body of several hundred Deadwoodites sallied forth to attack the shanty.

But to their astonishment they saw the Prince of the Road and his band dashing away up the gulch, mounted upon their swift steeds, that had been concealed in a shed at the back of Masked Maude's shanty.

It was no use to follow in pursuit. Experience had gone to show that on horseback the daring knights of the road could not be taken. So they were allowed to go, and Deadwood's population breathed easier, when they had vanished from view.

With them went Buffalo Ben, Wrestling Walt, Belle, Stella—who was resolved to link her fortunes with Ben—and Calamity Jane.

Nothing was seen of Lightning Luke; so he was left behind. On the trail was encountered Leone, Deadwood Dick's beautiful wife, and this made the little band complete.

To the outlaw stronghold on the mountain-top, in the depth of the Hills, they went, and there we leave them.

After leaving the fortune-teller's shanty, Lightning Luke went with Wadsworth directly to the latter's parlor in the Centennial Hotel, the door of which he took care to lock, while the key he slipped into his pocket.

"There!" he said, an ominous glitter in his eyes, "we're now free from interruption!"

"Yes," the millionaire replied hoarsely, "we are alone. And what do you propose to do?"

"I will show you," the hunter said; then he left the room, locking the door after him. He, however, soon returned, bringing with him a pair of dueling-pistols.

First, he cut loose the millionaire's bonds, and then handed him a pistol.

"Aaron Wadsworth," he spoke, his tones cold and stern, "we'll now come to a settlement. You are responsible for the death of my father, and I want your life. If you can take mine, however, all right. See! the clock on yonder mantle is about to strike. At the first stroke, we will fire!"

Then up came the pistols and the two men waited.

"One!" chimed the clock, and the flash of two pistols followed. Without a groan, Aaron Wadsworth fell to the floor—dead!

Then Lightning Luke turned away. His mission was fulfilled.

What shall we say in conclusion?

After a week's rest at the stronghold of Deadwood Dick, during which time Ben fully recovered, he and Stella and Wrestling Walt and Belle, set out for Bozeman, which post they reached in safety, and there bade adieu to the Prince of the Road and his followers.

At Bozeman there occurred two marriages, and the reader need not take long to guess who were the happy brides and bridegrooms.

From Bozeman the newly-wedded quartet came East, and now our Buffalo Ben is engaged in prosecuting his own and Mabel's claims for inheritance; which, when they are duly recognized, will make them among the wealthiest of their State.

May they ever live happy and enjoy that which an evil father tried to cheat them out of!

THE END.

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BUFFALO BEN, The Prince of the Pistol; **Or, Deadwood Dick in Disguise.**

A SEQUEL TO "THE DOUBLE DAGGERS."

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "THE DOUBLE DAGGERS," ETC., ETC.



BUFFALO BEN.

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But it was his last shot.

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Nothing was seen of Lightning Luke; so he was left behind. On the trail was encountered Leone, Deadwood Dick's beauteous wife, and this made the little band complete.

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Then up came the pistols and the two men waited.

"One!" chimed the clock, and the flash of two pistols followed. Without a groan, Aaron Wadsworth fell to the floor—dead!

Then Lightning Luke turned away. His mission was fulfilled.

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| 25 Gilt-Edged Dick | 57 Deadwood Dick Trapped |
| 26 Bonanza Bill, the Man-Tracker; or, The Secret Twelve | 58 Buck Hawk, Detective; or, The Messenger Boy's Fortune |
| 27 Chip, the Girl Sport | 59 Deadwood Dick's Disguise; or, Wild Walt, the Sport |
| 28 Jack Hoyle's Lead; or, The Road to Fortune | 60 Dumb Dick's Pard; or, Eliza Jane, the Gold Miner |
| 29 Boss Bob, the King of Bootblacks | 61 Deadwood Dick's Mission |
| 30 Deadwood Dick's Double; or, The Ghost of Gorgon's Gulch | 62 Spotter Fritz; or, The Store-Detective's Decoy |
| 31 Blonde Bill; or, Deadwood Dick's Home Base | 63 The Detective Road-Agent; or, The Miners of Sassafras City |
| 32 Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent | 64 Colorado Charlie's Detective Dash; or, The Cattle Kings |